

lies and slander by abbeyway

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Angst with a Happy Ending, Fake/Pretend Relationship, Idiots in Love, M/M

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Stanley Urís

Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-09-17

Updated: 2019-12-11

Packaged: 2019-12-13 03:06:05

Rating: Mature

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 7

Words: 35,325

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Eddie only makes up a boyfriend to stop Beverly nagging him about his non-existent work life balance. He never expects that she'll actually come to town and want to meet said boyfriend.

Just another fake dating AU, because canon killed me.

1. Chapter 1

It's really all Jeremy the intern's fault.

Eddie's already at the end of his fuse. His company's recently decided they want to try and go international, and it's Eddie's job to present a report on how that decision will affect shareholders in the short term. To try and lighten Eddie's load the company gave him an intern, Jeremy, to help compile the report. That would have been great if Jeremy was not the son of the CEO and a walking, talking disaster.

Half of Eddie's work hours were now spent keeping an eye on Jeremy. Jeremy who liked to live tweet during work, thought comic sans looked professional, and wore flip flops on casual Friday. On his first day, he asked Eddie how to use a paperclip. On his second, he set fire to the office kitchen after trying to microwave aluminum foil.

Today Eddie had to give him a lecture about not using company computers to download personal material after his decision to pirate porn led to their entire floors desktops being infected by a virus. Jeremy's suggestion that maybe Eddie should give watching porn a shot, given how stressed he is all the time, didn't help matters.

God, Eddie wishes murder was legal.

He's been home from work for half an hour, and about twenty minutes of that has been spent on the phone with Beverly, trying to get her to listen to his rant about Jeremy and the problem with spoiled, rich man children who have never worked a day in their lives.

But Beverly, being Beverly, doesn't want to talk about Jeremy ("I hear enough about dumb white men as it is Eddie"), she wants to talk about Eddie's love life, or lack thereof. Despite having moved to Chicago right after high school graduation, Beverly's never given up on her pseudo-older sister role in Eddie's life, and that means a lot of nagging about his total lack of work life balance.

According to Beverly, Eddie wouldn't act like he had such a stick up his ass if he got an actual dick up his ass. So she's taken it upon

herself to frequently try and set him up with any and every queer man she knows who is in the tri-state area, which has proven to be a surprising amount.

Tonight she wants to talk about Charlie, her friend who is moving to the city and doesn't know anyone in the area. Eddie remembers Charlie. He met him in Chicago back when he visited Bev last year, he had a man bun and a tattoo that supposedly said freedom in mandarin. He also taught yoga. Eddie had not liked Charlie.

"He's a really good guy Eddie, I swear. Don't let the tattoo turn you off. He got it in Thailand when he was like, nineteen. Everyone does dumb shit when they're that age. I know you might still be kind of put off after the whole Dave thing last month, but I swear I didn't know that he had turned into a Trump supporter -"

Maybe it's the exhaustion. Maybe it's the rage simmering through his veins thanks to Jeremy the intern. But tonight, as he sits in front of his laptop, his vision spotty from twelve straight hours of computer staring, Eddie feels like Beverly is nagging and he just wants it to stop.

So he does the only logical thing, really. He lies.

"Actually Bev, I'm already seeing someone, so Charlie's gonna be a hard pass."

There's a moment's pause before a shriek barrels down the phone, so loud that Eddie has to briefly hold it away from his ear in a thwarted attempt to protect his hearing.

"Jesus Bev, it's not that exc-"

"Since when? Why the fuck didn't you tell me before?"

"Uhhh." *Because it isn't real.* "Well it's still kind of new. I don't want to jinx it, y'know?"

"Aw, that's actually kind of sweet Kaspbrak, you must really like the guy." She replies, and a wave of guilt floods through him. Beverly just wants what's best for him, even if the way she goes about him is driving him insane. "So tell me about him then. He must be pretty

fucking special if he got you out of your self induced celibacy vow.”

“I don’t know,” Eddie grumbles, minimizing the presentation and opening up his email. There’s a new message from his CEO with the subject title *Upcoming Performance Review: Jeremy*, “It just kind of happened I guess.”

“Just kind of happened?” Beverly replies, decidedly unimpressed. Instead of saying anything, Eddie opens up the email, staring at the message with ever growing dread (‘As I’m sure you are aware, Jeremy will one day be a vital contributor to this company...’) as his friend continues. “What the fuck does that mean? Did you guys just like, hook up in a bar? Or were you friends first?”

“Uh, that one.” Eddie flexes his fingers and begins to gingerly type a very politically correct reply, beginning with *your son* and ending with *dipshit*.

“Oh, friends first hey? So have you guys been friends for awhile then?” A gasp over the phone, “Have I met him?”

Message now complete, Eddie’s hand pauses over the send button as he tries to find a response that will satisfy Beverly.

“... Eddie?”

“Yeah, look Bev, I really hadn’t planned on telling you anything tonight. Do you think we could cut the third degree for now?” He pauses and puts on a pleading voice, trying to stamp down the uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. “Like I said, I really don’t want to jinx this. Bill doesn’t even know about it yet.”

“Of course. You don’t have to tell me anything if you’re not ready.” Beverly sighs. “Besides, I’m sure I’ll meet him eventually anyways right?”

“Right.” Eddie mutters as he hits the delete button instead of send, mentally congratulating himself on his impeccable self control.

They say their goodbyes a few minutes later, Beverly having given up on dragging any more details out of Eddie. If Eddie’s a little surprised at how easily she’s given up, he doesn’t say anything, just thinks that

maybe she's finally discovered that respecting boundaries is a good thing after all these years.

And if she sounds a little too smug when she says "See you soon" at the end of the call, well, he doesn't give it a second thought.

*

He really should have given it a second thought.

It's been over a month since Eddie lied to Beverly and, if he's being honest, it's been pretty nice. He hasn't even had to work too hard to keep up the charade, giving Beverly the bare minimum of answers whenever she tries to get more details. It's not his fault if Beverly assumes that, whenever he's too busy to talk on the phone, he's with his new boyfriend and not hunched over a desk, staring at excel sheets until he goes cross-eyed.

But now Beverly is coming to town for a week, and she wants to meet Eddie's boyfriend.

When he first hears the news, Eddie briefly debates owning up to the lie. But he flakes at the idea of having to face a disappointed Beverly and explain why he felt the need to lie. Manufacturing a break up before the trip also isn't an option, since that would only lead to a heart to heart about his relationship issues, with the added bonus of Beverly trying to set him up with Charlie again as a way of helping Eddie to 'move on'.

By the time Eddie arrives at Stan and Patty Uris' housewarming party that evening, he's come to the conclusion that he needs to find a fake boyfriend, and fast.

The party is surprisingly busy given the introverted nature of the two hosts. Feeling overwhelmed, Eddie searches the crowd for Ben, Bill, Mike, or Stan, and is immediately grateful when he spies all four of them huddled around the coffee table in the corner. He quickly makes his way over to the table and is unsurprised to find them playing a game of Jenga.

"Jesus Christ, you party animals, would you mind toning it down a

little?” He huffs light heartedly, settling down on the floor beside Ben.

“Jenga should never be toned down Kaspbrak,” Ben mumbles, watching with fascination as Mike confidently pulls from the bottom row, leaving the tower precariously balanced on only one piece.

“Says the archit – wait how the hell has that thing not fallen yet?”

Eventually the Jenga comes crumbling down and, despite Ben’s desperate pleas for another round, its replaced with a large bowl of Cool Ranch Doritos. With the distraction of the game gone, the Losers all begin to eagerly ask about what Eddie’s been up to for the past few weeks. Eddie realizes with a prickling sense of guilt that Beverly’s not the only person his work’s been keeping him from.

After updating the Losers on the trials and tribulations of Jeremy the intern, Eddie briefly mentions that Beverly’s coming to town, fully aware of how excited they’ll all be to see her again. He doesn’t mention anything about the boyfriend situation.

“M-maybe she could r-r-read my script?” asks Bill hopefully, “I-I haven’t been h-having much luck with the n-networks and B-Bev’s always b-b-been really good at giving f-feedback.”

“You’re not having any luck because your ending sucks.”

“Stan!”

Stan shrugs. When nobody else says anything, Bill turns over to Mike, who is carefully avoiding Bill’s eyes.

“Et t-tu, Mike?”

“I mean,” Mike lifts his hand in the air, searching for words, “It could maybe do with a little bit of tweaking...”

As the conversation devolves into a debate over Bill’s ending, Eddie lets his thoughts drift back to the fake boyfriend problem.

The obvious choice is to ask one of the Losers to help him out. Bill, Mike, Stan, and Ben are all objectively attractive in their own right.

In fact, Eddie's always considered himself to be the least good looking of the bunch, with his decidedly average height and dull brown eyes. Plus, due to the co-dependent nature of their friend group, all four of them know things about Eddie that arguably only a boyfriend know.

But as Eddie takes a moment to look at each of his friends in turn, he realizes that none of them would realistically work.

Bill is, well, Bill.

Stan is in a loving, committed relationship with a woman.

Mike is heading to Florida in a week, and Eddie told Beverly that his boyfriend would be in town during her visit.

And Ben is out because his massive crush on Beverly leaves him a blushing, stuttering mess whenever they're in the same room.

Which means that Eddie is currently facing down the prospect of trying to find a fake boyfriend on the internet, which, weird. Eddie can picture his tinder profile now: **Eddie, 28. Are YOU willing to be gay for pay?**

He scrunches up his nose at the thought and takes a swig of beer. Maybe he should just -

"YOU SLOPPY BITCH!"

Forced out of his thoughts, Eddie turns around to see one Richie Tozier dramatically toss his playing cards across the table at Patty's confused younger brother.

"Sloppy bitch?"

"Yeah Matt," Richie leans forward, waving his finger back and forth to further emphasize each syllable, "Slo-ppy bi-tch."

An amateur comedian and Stan's former roommate, Richie has been on the periphery of Eddie's social circle for over a year now. The two of them aren't friends, but they're also not not friends either.

If drunk enough, Eddie could be pressed to admit that he had found Richie attractive the night they first met - Richie all gangly and goofy, with his bi-pride pin and thick framed glasses. But then Eddie was introduced to Sandra, Richie's long term girlfriend, and any possible attraction was quickly stamped down. Eddie had fallen for taken men before, and it wasn't going to happen again.

Luckily, Richie had turned out to be an obnoxious, vulgar loud mouth who loved to embarrass Eddie any chance he got, so falling for him never wound up becoming an issue.

Eddie realizes he must be staring when Richie glances over at him and raises his beer bottle in mock salute. Feeling his face redden, Eddie turns back to his friends, who are still debating the ending to Bill's story.

"It is a little confusing," Ben admits, "Especially when -"

"So how's Richie doing after the whole break up thing?" Eddie interrupts, aiming for casual and sorely missing, if his friends' confused expressions are anything to go by.

"Okay, I think," Stan shrugs, "I mean, he hasn't mentioned getting anymore noise complaints for playing Adele songs all night, so things must be a little better now. Why do you ask?"

"Y-yeah." Bill adds from the couch, hands now greedily wrapped around the bowl of Doritos, "Since when d-d-do you care about R-Richie?"

"Well pardon me for trying to give a fuck," Eddie grumbles, ignoring the pointed glance exchanged between Bill and Stan. A beat passes where no one says anything. "Your ending still sucks Bill, now pass the god damn Doritos."

*

One hour and three drinks later, Eddie spies Richie weaving his way through the party goers, headed towards the balcony. It's down to just him, Bill, and Mike, sitting around the coffee table, Ben having abandoned the party for his bed half an hour earlier and Stan getting

roped into a conversation about wedding plans with Patty and her friends. Knowing that Bill and Mike are paying him zero attention, Eddie waits approximately 90 seconds before standing up and following Richie.

Sliding the balcony door open, he steps outside to find Richie with his back towards the party, quietly smoking a cigarette.

At the sound of the door, the other man turns around slowly, putting on a wolfish grin when he sees who's joining him outside. Richie takes a drag of his cigarette and leans against the railing, slowly blowing the smoke up into the sky above him.

"Spaghetti! To what do I owe the honour?"

Instead of groaning at the nickname, Eddie comes up beside Richie and places his forearms on the railing, fixing his eyes on the Manhattan skyline in front of them. He can feel Richie's gaze on him, it's piercing. "Nothing. Just wanted some fresh air, I guess."

"Fresh air with yours truly?" Richie quirks an eyebrow, "Well I'll be damned. I should've showered this morning if I knew I'd be in such close quarters with you Spaghetti."

"Probably wouldn't matter, you'd just wind up smelling like fucking cigarettes anyways." returns Eddie, pausing afterwards when he realizes that his comment had come out a little more biting than intended.

He turns to Richie to apologize. But before he can say anything, Richie takes another quick drag and blows the smoke teasingly in Eddie's direction. His eyes dance as Eddie begins to sputter in horror, "You and me both Spaghetti."

"Dude what the fuck! This is my favourite shirt. Now it's going to stink of cigarettes all week."

"No, it's going to smell of me all week." Richie waggles his eyebrows suggestively, "Make sure you don't put it in the wash anytime soon, that's quality spank bank material."

God, this is not how Eddie pictured the conversation going. He flits

his eyes back and forth aimlessly, as if a sign with instructions on how to ask someone to be your fake boyfriend will magically appear.

“Speaking of spank bank –“ He cringes as soon as the words leave his mouth, because *Jesus Christ*, as Richie snorts beside him “Are you, you know, seeing someone right now?”

“Seeing someone? Or fucking someone? The spank bank reference has me confused.”

“Oh fuck off. Either, both. I dunno.”

A flash of something vulnerable crosses Richie’s expression, and he looks down at his feet as he answers Eddie’s question. “Well the answer’s the same to both. And it’s a no.” He stamps his cigarette out on the railing. “What’s it to you?”

“Well, I just – I have a favour to ask.”

Any vulnerability that Eddie thinks he saw is gone in an instant, “A favour to do with me and dating? Well jeez Spaghetti, I thought I went over this with you already. While the night me and your mom shared was life changing, I just don’t think I’m ready to commit to –“

Eddie can feel his fist clenching in frustration, “No, not my mom, you dumbass,” he barks out, “I want you to date me.”

Richie immediately stops talking. His jaw drops open, eyes growing wide behind his glasses. Eddie hastily continues just as Richie manages to croak out a confused *what*. “It’d just be for a couple of weeks. A friend of mine is coming to town and I need someone to pretend to be my boyfriend while she’s here. I’d pay you and everything.”

No longer frozen in place, Richie leans back onto the railing, smirk on his face as he looks over at Eddie. “A fake boyfriend huh?”

“That’s the idea, yeah.”

“Hm,” Richie taps his fingers against his chin, mulling it over. “And so why does this friend need to think you have a boyfriend?”

“That’s none of your fucking business.”

“Kind of sounds like it will be.”

“Well it’s none of your fucking business right now.”

“Alright, alright Spaghetti. I’m just trying to get the lay of land here,” Richie pauses, “So how much are we talking? Money wise?”

Eddie hesitates, he hasn’t thought about that part yet. He’d just kind of assumed that Richie would laugh in his face and say no. “I don’t know, actually. Do you have something in mind?”

Richie smiles and looks at Eddie with the total, absolute confidence of a child who is about to get what he wants, “Street Fighter.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Street Fighter. The arcade game. I played it all the time as a kid back in Maine, and I’ve always wanted to get one for my apartment. But, you know,” He rubs his thumb against his middle and index finger, “Cash flow problems and all that.”

Eddie stares at him, dumbfounded. “You want me to buy you an arcade game?”

“Not just any arcade game, Spaghetti, Street Fighter. They’re like, 250 bucks on amazon. Chump change for a high roller like you.”

“I am not a high roller!”

“You have a salary. And health insurance. You’re a high roller.”

“Jesus, that’s a ridiculous – wait, you don’t have health insurance?”

“That is neither here nor there, Spaghetti,” Richie retorts haughtily, “Get me the game” He lifts a finger and pokes it gently against Eddie’s chest, “and I’m all yours.”

Eddie rolls his eyes, slapping Richie’s hand away “Alright fine. Street Fighter it is.”

“Jesus, that was easier than I thought. Maybe I should have asked for something bigger, like a car or something.”

“There is no way I would have gotten you a car. You’d be a menace on the roads.”

“Lies and slander,” Richie sniffs, shaking his hair out and looking back towards the apartment, “Man, I can’t wait to see Stan’s face when he hears about this. He’s gonna burst a blood vessel or something.”

“Oh, actually, about that...”

“About that?”

“I was kind of hoping that we could, you know, not tell the others about this whole thing.” Eddie’s voice rises unintentionally at the end of the sentence, making it sound more like a question than he had intended.

Richie shoots him a confused look, “How do you mean? Are we just like, going to avoid them while your friend’s in town? Won’t she want to meet up with them?”

“Well yeah, but I was just thinking that...” Eddie cringes in hesitation, “that we could maybe just tell them that we’re dating?”

Placing his hand over his heart, Richie paints on an expression of abject horror “Wait, you want us to lie to our friends? Spaghetti how **COULD YOU.**”

“Just for two weeks! C’mon Rich, you know they’re all absolute shit at lying. If they knew it was fake, it’d be written all over their faces the entire time.” Eddie can feel himself panicking, his voice speeding up like it always does when he’s nervous. “Bev would see right through it and then I’d be fucked. It wouldn’t have to be forever, we can tell them the truth as soon as she leaves. I swear!”

“Calm down, Spaghetti, I’m only messing with you.” Eddie lets out a breath, watching as Richie scrubs the back of his hand against his jaw, “But you do know this means we’d have to convince our friends that we actually like each other, which is a whole other ball game.”

At that, Eddie feels himself tense up. Would that really be so hard? Maybe it would be. After all, Richie did just break up with Sandra, she of the mile long legs and big blue eyes. Where she was the life of the party, Eddie is a 5'9 ball of neuroses who sucks the fun out of any event he goes to. He's not exactly Richie's type. A familiar feeling of not being good enough begins to niggle at the back of Eddie's mind. Feeling Richie's gaze on him, Eddie turns around and presses his back into the railing, self consciously crossing his arms.

"What?" He asks, voice gone quiet, "Is it that hard to believe that you'd date someone like me?"

A strangled sound from Richie, "No, no, I didn't say that. I just – well, what about me? Like you'd ever go for me."

The hesitancy in Richie's voice lifts Eddie out of his thoughts. He looks over at the other man and smirks, "I've done stupider things, trust me."

"Oh? Who's things?" The middle finger is all Richie gets in reply. "Fine Spaghetti, no need to kiss and tell." A beat, "So, when does this friend of yours arrive?"

"She gets here in a week. So we have until then to..." Eddie's sentence peters out, at a loss for words. He makes an awkward gesture with his hands, "Figure stuff out I guess. Are you free tomorrow afternoon? I know it's a Sunday but it's my only day off. Maybe you could come over?"

"Sure thing Spaghetti man."

Richie's eyes flick back inside, and he turns to Eddie with a mischievous grin. Pushing off from the balcony, he begins to slowly crowd up against Eddie, placing one hand on either side of him. Eddie stares up at the other man, dumbstruck by the sudden lack of personal space. Richie's eyes travel down to Eddie's lips and Eddie notices, for the first time, how chapped Richie's lips are.

"What – what are you doing Rich?"

"Just doing some convincing." Eddie looks over Richie's shoulder,

and spies Bill and Stan staring at the balcony from across the room, eyebrows raised so high that they're disappearing into their respective hairlines. So that's what Richie's up to. "I mean, if we're planning on telling them that we're dating, there's got to be some hints. Our friends might be shit at lying, but they're not blind."

"Right." Eddie swallows, "Got it."

Richie lifts his hand to Eddie's face and begins to lean forward. Eddie's body immediately stiffens up, sensing that the other man might be about to kiss him. He tries to think back to the last time that he kissed anyone. Jesus, has it really been over a year? Maybe Beverly's right, maybe he does need to get laid.

But just as their lips are about to touch, Richie swerves his head away, burrowing his face in Eddie's hair. Eddie can feel the smile on Richie's face as he whispers into Eddie's ear, voice filled with faux motherly concern, "You stink of cigarettes, Spaghetti. Has anyone ever told you that those things will kill you?"

He howls with laughter as Eddie lunges at him with an indignant squawk.

Notes for the Chapter:

This isn't beta'd, and I'm currently full of NyQuil.

I apologize.

2. Chapter 2

Eddie's initial thought when he wakes up at 10 am to the smell of cigarettes is *I must be having a stroke.*

Then he remembers the previous night, and the fact that Richie had blown smoke on all over his shirt. Tentatively lifting his duvet, Eddie comes face to face with the offending shirt and realizes with mild distaste that he must have worn it to bed. He groans as Richie's spank bank comment runs unwarranted through his head. Fucking Tozier.

Following their conversation on the balcony, Eddie and Richie had kept their distance the rest of the party, Eddie returning to his spot around the coffee table and Richie to his poker match. Eddie could have sworn that he felt Richie's eyes on him the entire evening. Yet somehow every time he turned around, Richie was staring at his cards.

He managed to finally catch Richie in the act towards the end of the night. But instead of acting shamefaced, like Eddie would have, Richie had just sent him a lascivious wink across the room before turning back to the match.

Bill's smug "So how's it going Eddie?" when he had turned back to the coffee table, mortified, strongly suggested that the moment had not gone unnoticed. Mercifully though, Bill had let the line of questioning die when Eddie only grumbled "Fuck off Denborough" in reply.

However, the line of questioning had clearly risen from the dead, given that the first thing Eddie sees when he rolls over and checks his phone is a series of texts from his best friend.

Dude.

What was up with you and Richie last night?

You guys looked like you were about to bang out there on the balcony.

Eddie rolls his eyes, trying to think of what to say before settling on a

half truth.

It's complicated. And we were not.

As Eddie waits for Bill to reply, he decides to scroll through the messages on his phone, looking for his last conversation with Richie. Eddie doesn't text with a lot of people, so while he and Richie rarely talk, it still doesn't take long for him to find their last messages in his inbox.

In a way it's surprising that the two of them even have each other's numbers. Eddie winces at the memory of him asking Richie if they could swap numbers the night they met. He had felt so brave at the time, so pleased when Richie had thrown him a huge grin and rattled off his digits. But then Sandra had shown up, and Eddie had quickly learnt that Richie was enthusiastic about everything, not just some bumbling hypochondriac trying to flirt with him.

Needless to say, Eddie had never really wanted to text him after that.

Clicking on Richie's name, he begins to scroll through their chat history. Almost all their interactions consisted of Richie either sending him incoherent drunk texts or juvenile, out dated memes. Of all their conversations, Eddie's only initiated one, having sent Richie a rather banal "Surprise party for Bill on the 10th, you in?" back in January.

The one-sidedness of their interactions makes Eddie feel strangely uncomfortable. It's not like he meant to be a dick to Richie, it's just that –

Two new messages from Bill flash across his phone.

You absolutely were.

You two were one minute away from an arrest for public indecency.

Eddie quickly swipes the messages away. Swallowing his earlier feeling of discomfort, he types out a message to Richie instead of replying to Bill.

Hey. You're probably not awake yet, but feel free to come over

whenever. I'm home and won't be going anywhere all day. Just text me when you're on your way.

Message sent, Eddie gets out of bed and strips off his shirt, throwing it (perhaps a bit too aggressively) into the laundry basket before heading to the bathroom for a much needed, very long shower.

When he returns to his bedroom, his phone is lit up with a burst of new messages. He can't help but be shocked when he sees that they're all from Richie. Considering how much the other man had reeked of booze the night before, Eddie hadn't expected him to be awake for at least another three hours.

top of the morning spaghetti! am already up and at em so I can just head on over now

you'll need to send me your address tho

unless part of your plan involves me roaming the streets of NYC, trying to find you

with coldplay playing in the background

An image of Richie Tozier running through Central Park to Fix You, one of his trademark goofy shirts billowing in the wind, flashes unwillingly through Eddie's mind. He snorts at the idea.

NYC is 300 square miles. That would take months. You'd starve first.

never underestimate my ability to sniff out a free meal Eduardo

now seriously: address

*

Eddie's managed to crush most of a very strong, very large pot of coffee by the time there's a knock on his door 50 minutes later.

"Well aren't you a sight of sore eyes, Spaghetti." Richie grins. There's bags under his eyes and his hair is still ruffled from sleep, the beginnings of a five o clock shadow just starting to form around his

jaw.

Before Eddie has a chance to reply, Richie's eyes cast downward and pause about halfway down Eddie's body, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion. It takes Eddie a moment to realize that Richie's staring at his hands, which are now vibrating unintentionally by his side. He quickly shoves them into his pockets.

"I, uh, drank a lot of coffee before you got here." Eddie stammers. He motions with his head to the apartment behind him. "C'mon in."

Richie lets out a low whistle as he crosses the threshold. "Well, well, Eddie Kaspbrak's apartment, as I live and breathe."

Eddie can't help but feel on display as Richie greedily takes in his surroundings. It's a small one bedroom apartment, clean and basic with white washed walls and scuffed hardwood flooring. Richie immediately zeros in on the bookshelf by the television where Eddie's childhood comics are neatly on display.

The back of Eddie's neck prickles as the other man walks over to the shelf and leans over, glancing through the collection. He instinctively cross his arms as Richie turns back to him with a cheeky expression, "Jesus, Spaghetti, I didn't realize you were still a virgin at heart."

"Ha-ha, the comic book nerd is a virgin. Real fucking original."

Richie's smile fades, and he runs a hand awkwardly through his hair. "Dude, I'm just messing with you. I'm actually kind of jealous that you've managed to keep them in such good condition," At Eddie's confused look, he continues. "I just threw mine on the floor for twenty odd years, and now they're crumpled to shit."

Oh.

"Had some good ones too." Richie sighs.

For a moment Eddie debates asking Richie which good ones he had, because he is nothing if not nosy, especially when it comes to comics. But then he remembers why Richie is standing in his apartment and quickly changes his mind.

“Right,” says Eddie. He wanders behind the breakfast bar and picks up his almost empty, very much abused French Press “Did you want the last bit of coffee? I think I’m going to start having heart palpitations if I drink anymore.”

Richie’s face lights up as he makes his way over, hopping onto a stool directly across from Eddie. “Don’t mind if I do. Gracias Eduardo.”

Eddie grabs a mug and fills it with the last dredges of coffee. As he passes it to Richie, the other man clears his throat. “So, before we get started, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask.”

“I, uh – yeah, sure. Shoot.”

“Alright.” Richie says, readjusting his glasses. He folds his hands into his lap, steaming mug of coffee sitting in front of him, and looks at Eddie with wide, innocent eyes. “So when do we get to fuck on a piano?”

“I’m sorry, what!” Eddie yelps. “No, no, no. There’s not – there’s not going to be any fucking of any kind.” He takes a breath, trying not to throttle the now chuckling Richie as the full sentence hits him. “Wait, why – why would we fuck on a piano? That just seems unsanitary. And loud.”

“C’mon Spaghetti, it’s a Pretty Woman reference.”

Eddie wrinkles his nose. “Pretty Woman?”

Richie looks at him like he’s spouted a second head. “Well, yeah. I mean, you are paying me to date you. Which is, like, the entire plot of that movie.”

“I haven’t seen it.”

Now it’s Richie’s turn to yelp. “You haven’t seen Pretty Woman?”

“That’s what I just said.”

“But it’s a classic!”

“Well jeez, now that you say that, I think I have seen it.”

“Really?”

“No, you dickwad.”

The two soon migrate over to the couch, Eddie having poured himself a cup of water (not coffee), while continuing to argue about what constitutes a classic movie. Richie immediately perches his feet on the coffee table, a move which Eddie loudly opposes, pointing out that (a) he eats dinner on said table and (b) he has no idea where the hell Richie’s feet have been.

Unfortunately, feet on the coffee table doesn’t seem like such a bad thing when Richie decides to relocate them to the sofa instead. His legs are so long that they take up the majority of the couch, creeping onto the side that Eddie has already claimed.

Eddie grits his teeth as Richie’s toes dig into his sides. “Did your mother ever talk to you about personal space, Richie?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, is this bothering you?”

The toe begins to slowly travel up his chest, eventually poking Eddie in the cheek. Eddie quickly slaps it down and sends Richie a murderous glare.

“You know, I’d really prefer not to get sent down for murder before Bev comes to town.”

“Sent down? Oh ye of little faith, Spaghetti. I bet you’d make it off scot free. Speaking of Bev though - ” Richie turns around clumsily on the couch, tummy now on the cushions, and reaches toward the side table beside him.

Eddie tries very hard not to stare at how Richie’s boxy button up shirt has ridden up his back, revealing a strip of pale skin right above his jeans. He shifts his gaze quickly as Richie turns back to face him, hand now grasping a picture frame.

“This would be her, I’m guessing?” Richie asks, tipping the frame so that Eddie can properly see the photograph.

Eddie nods. The photograph is from Eddie’s 21st birthday party. It

shows Beverly with her arms thrown across Eddie's shoulders, pulling him in for a kiss. Eddie's eyes are crinkled with laughter as he sticks his tongue out at the camera. One of his hands is grasping a bottle of beer, the other wrapped around Beverly's waist.

"She's pretty, Ben's drunken soliloquies don't really do her justice." Richie inspects the photo one last time, before setting it back on the side table. "So what's her deal then?"

"Her deal?"

"Yeah, like - who is she? What's she like?"

The question momentarily takes Eddie aback. It's a stark reminder of how few conversations he and Richie have actually had over the past year, despite running in the same social circle. He shakes the thought out of his head and throws Richie a smirk. "I'm sorry, are you suggesting that the phrase *January embers* was not, in fact, informative?"

Richie drags his hands down his cheeks and lets out a loud, frustrated groan. "What do those words even mean?"

"From my one English class, I think I can say that it means: Bev has red hair, I like it. But what the fuck do I know?" Eddie shrugs. "And honestly, I don't really know what to tell you about her. Um, she lives in Chicago? She's finishing up her PhD there, at Northwestern."

"What's the PhD in?" Richie asks.

"Psychology – something about the effects of childhood trauma in adolescence."

Richie lets out a low whistle. "Yowza. I'm guessing she doesn't get to talk much about work at parties, then. Seems like a bit of a mood killer."

Eddie laughs, thinking back to the many, many times that Beverly has managed to bring up Harlow and his rhesus monkeys at parties. "You'd be surprised."

"And you two grew up together, right?"

“Yeah. She lived like, three doors down from me. We were pretty much inseparable up until freshman year.”

“Ah, the ol’ girl next door. The reason young men everywhere have to keep a box of tissues next to their bed.” Eddie wrinkles his nose, because gross, and takes a sip of water just as Richie’s eyes light up with childish glee. “Man, I bet Ben would have sold a kidney to have grown up three doors down from her. Think of all the poetry potential.”

“So many embers, so little time.” Eddie says wistfully.

“The world will never know what it lost.” Richie adds, tone mournful. He rests his hands behind his head and leans back against the armrest, sending Eddie a curious look. “So what happened freshman year?”

“Hm?”

“Well, you said you were inseparable until then.” And oh right, Eddie thinks, he did say that. “What happened?”

“That’s when Bev moved to Seattle. Her aunt decided to sue her dad for custody, and won.”

It’s clearly not the answer Richie’s expecting. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah, her dad was like, a steaming piece of shit. That’s kind of why we were inseparable. We both - we both weren’t all that happy at home. So we used to spend a lot of time together, hiding out from our families and shit.” The words too *much information* flash through Eddie’s head while he’s talking, but his mouth decides to keep going. Maybe it’s because he’s at home, tucked away from the world on his sofa. Or maybe it’s because Richie’s looking at him with an expression that is shockingly attentive. Whatever the reason, he continues. “There was this one apartment, in our block, that was abandoned. We figured out in junior high how to break into it, and we wound up like, turning it into our clubhouse and hanging out there every night. It was creepy as fuck. The walls creaked whenever the wind blew, I almost shit my pants every time. ”

Just as Eddie draws a breath, Richie pokes his toe deeper into his side. “Hanging out in an abandoned building? Think of the health code violations, Spaghetti.”

“I know.” Eddie shudders, flicking Richie’s toe with his hand. “We’re lucky we didn’t fucking get tetanus or something. I used to sleep with a goddamn surgical mask on whenever we stayed the night because I was convinced that a spider was going to lay eggs in my mouth while I was sleeping.”

At that, Richie lets out a soft chuckle. “That sounds more like it.” A beat passes and Eddie turns to look at the other man. Richie has an unreadable expression on his face. He looks nervous, almost, as if he’s trying to think of what to say next. His shoulders look oddly rigid, but his eyes are caring. Eddie immediately tenses up. “So why were you –“

Richie’s question is interrupted by Eddie’s phone vibrating obnoxiously from the coffee table.

“I should probably check that,” Eddie mutters, secretly grateful for the interruption, as he leans forward to grab the phone. “It could be work.”

It is not work. It is Bill Denborough. Who is, it would appear, a bit frustrated that Eddie still hasn’t replied to his earlier text.

EDWARD KASPBRAK I DEMAND A REPLY

THE FATE OF OUR LOSER NATION IS AT STAKE

Eddie snickers and holds the phone up to show Richie, who’s looking at him curiously. “This is what your balcony antics have done, Tozier. Bill Denborough wants answers.”

Richie just waves him off. “Pfft, that’s nothing. I had to deal with Stanley fucking Uris sending me looks all night.” And, well, Eddie has to admit that that is much scarier than a few grumpy texts. “So have you said anything about it to Bill?”

“Not really. I figured we should probably talk about it first, make sure we get our stories straight.”

“Look at you, thinking ahead like a grown up.”

“I’m a risk analyst, you dumbass. It is literally my job to think ahead.”

Richie rolls his eyes and mouths the word boring before he replies, “So then have you figured out how we’re going to say this whole thing started?”

“Um. Well I told Bev that it... just sort of happened?”

“You evasive motherfucker.”

“Hey man, I never said I was creative.”

Richie doesn’t say anything, instead leaning back against his side of the sofa, making himself comfortable as he stares out the window, eyes unfocused. Eddie wonders if that’s the face he makes during his comedy shows, when the audience throws him a word and he has to come up with something on the spot.

At that moment, Eddie realizes that Richie is actually the perfect person to be a fake boyfriend, since his entire career is based on improvisation. “Well to me, Spaghetti, just sort of happened sounds like a drunken hook up.”

“It does?”

“Yeah. Like, one day the sexual tension just got to be too much and we wound up fucking each other senseless mid-argument.” Richie shrugs, as if it should be obvious to Eddie, which it decidedly is not. “When did you first tell Bev about it?”

“Uh –“ It takes Eddie a moment to think back, his brain still hung up on the phrase *fucking each other senseless*. “Around mid June, I think?”

“Okay, well Ben’s birthday was at the beginning of June. Why don’t we say it started then? You and I were definitely both drunk enough to have an accidental hook up that night.”

Eddie stiffens at the memory. Ben’s birthday had taken place after his first week supervising Jeremy the intern, and had turned it a lethal

combination of sleep deprivation, an empty stomach, and jager bombs.

About halfway through the night, Eddie had accidentally walked in on a heart to heart between Stan and a very shit faced Richie in the washroom. Eddie hadn't heard much – it had really just been Richie whining about how hard it is to love someone who doesn't love you back, but for some reason the man had looked at Eddie like he had overheard the goddamn nuclear codes.

Richie had then spent the rest of the night alternating between ignoring Eddie and teasing him for showing up whenever he wasn't wanted. In a surprise to no one, it had eventually led to a huge argument and Eddie storming out of the bar.

That was the night Richie wanted to say they hooked up?

"I don't know." Eddie hesitates, mind focusing back on Richie and Stan in the washroom, "Weren't you like, super hung up on Sandra that night?"

"What?" Richie sputters, "Fuck no."

Well, alright then. Looks like Eddie's going to have stew over that comment for the rest of the day.

"That night makes total sense, if you think about it." Richie continues, as he pushes his glasses further up his nose, "You went home right after we argued, yeah? Well I left like maybe five minutes after you. So for all they know, I chased after you to apologize and then, bada bing bada boom, we were riding the midnight train to pound town."

"How romantic."

"Hey man, if you wanted romantic, you should have talked to Ben, not me." Richie says, lifting his foot and tapping it gently against Eddie's cheek. "Although if you really want, I'm sure I could pen you a few haikus."

Eddie promptly swats Richie's foot away from his face.

“Or maybe a sonnet? How about a limerick?”

It arguably takes Eddie much longer than it should to put Richie off the idea of writing him poetry. But once the two get over that hurdle, they're soon able to come up with a relatively realistic timeline of their “relationship”. Everything's to have started at Ben's birthday, with the initial drunken fling being followed by a series of sober hook ups that eventually bled into time spent together outside the bedroom. There was to be no official first date. No grand declaration of feelings. Fitting with what Eddie had said to Bev over the phone, their relationship was to have just kind of happened.

Eddie's about to bring up how they'll break the news to the Losers when Richie asks. “Hey, have you ever been to Clint's Diner? The place just down the block?”

“Nope.”

He's met with a look of horror. “Really? How is that possible? It's like a –”

“If you say it's a classic, Richie, I will cut your fucking tongue out.”

“... it's an institution?”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Anyways, they have these pancakes there that are like, I dunno, the breakfast equivalent of switching hammocks - that means sixty-nineing, Spaghetti.”

“Yeah, I know that, asshole.”

Richie holds up his hands in defense, “Just wanted to clarify, Eduardo. As they say, assuming makes an ass out of you and me. Anyways, I was thinking of going to get some, since I didn't eat before I came here, and all this chitchat has left me fucking starving. You could – you could come with me, maybe? You don't have to if you don't want to.” He hastily adds, “Just an offer.”

It's not what Eddie's expecting. His first impulse is to scoff and say absolutely not, because he's been to shitty NYC diners before, and he

does not have room in his schedule for a bout of food poisoning this week. But the only thing he's had in his stomach so far today is coffee. Plus he's been way too busy at work to actually buy groceries, so there's nothing in his cabinets except for stale cereal, which doesn't sound so appealing right now.

He tilts his head and looks at Richie, who's fidgeting across from him on the sofa.

"I could eat."

*

Richie wraps his arm loosely around Eddie's shoulders as soon as they step onto the street - a move that prompts Eddie to instinctually lurch away, "Dude, what the fuck?"

"Look Spaghetti," says Richie, reeling him back in. "if we're supposed to be dating, you have to look like you're comfortable with me touching you. Besides, you're like, perfect arm rest height."

"Fine. But no hand holding." Eddie points his finger into Richie's face, "It's a filthy, disease spreading tradition."

"That's cool. My hands are usually a bit sticky anyways."

"Oh my god, that's so not funny." Richie just laughs and pulls Eddie in closer.

As they're walking, Eddie tries to figure out what to do with his hands. Is he supposed to put his arm around Richie's waist? Or slide his hand into Richie's pocket? Eventually he settles on shoving both hands into his own pockets. He briefly wonders if Richie can tell how uncomfortable he feels. If the incessant chatter is anything to go by, the answer is probably no.

"And here she is," Richie loudly exclaims as they reach the end of the block.

A peeling white sign displays the name Clint's Diner in faded red lettering, while a smaller red awning hangs above the door, announcing that breakfast is available twenty four hours a day, seven

days a week. The windows on either side of the entrance have the blinds halfway pulled down, which leaves it impossible for anyone to see what's going on inside.

Eddie's not surprised he's never gotten food here.

Richie removes his arm from around Eddie's shoulders and moves to open the door, Eddie's body automatically registering the loss as Richie flashes him an excited grin. Much like its exterior, the interior of the diner is dark and dingy, all dark wood and maroon leather that's seen better days. A plastic poinsettia sits randomly on the counter. There are five other customers in the place, all sitting hunched over their coffees.

As Eddie takes in his surroundings, Richie walks over to the booth that sits empty in the far corner and gestures to it with a flourish. "Best seat in the house, Spaghetti."

"I don't have time to get E. Coli this week, Richie." Eddie grumbles as he sits down, grabbing the plastic coated menu that sits between the salt and pepper shakers.

"E. Coil Shmee-coli." Richie brushes him off.

Eddie flinches but doesn't say anything, focusing instead on looking through the menu and trying to pick out what dish looks the least risky. His inner debate is interrupted by the sound of a camera going off and he looks up to see Richie smiling sheepishly, phone in hand.

"Dude. What was that?"

"Just taking a snap."

"What! Why?"

"Because you look so adorable." Richie says, before reaching forward and snatching the menu from Eddie's hands. "Besides, there's no point even looking at that, Spaghetti. It's the pancakes or nothing."

Their waitress, hearty looking and on the far side of forty, arrives just as Eddie's preparing to lunge at Richie for the menu. A look of relief crosses her face when Richie automatically orders a coffee and

pancakes (extra whip) and she turns to Eddie expectantly. Ignoring Richie's pleading eyes, Eddie begrudgingly orders the exact same thing, deciding that it's finally time for another dose of caffeine.

"So. Clearly you've been here your fair share of times." He points out as their waitress returns with two steaming cups of coffee.

"Yeah. Sandra used to live right around the corner, so we'd come here whenever we were hungover and there was no food at her place. Which was pretty much every weekend, now that I think about it."

"Oh." A thought niggles at the back of Eddie's mind – is this the booth that the two of them always sat at? The *best seat in the house*? He wonders if they had the same waitress that's serving them today, and if she's mentally comparing him to Sandra right now. God, what a terrifying thought. "How long ago did you guys break up, again?"

"Officially? Going on three months now."

"What the hell does officially mean?"

"So nosy, Spaghetti."

"Hey man," Eddie crosses his arms defensively, leaning back against the booth "As your fake boyfriend, I should know a bit about your last relationship."

Richie's quiet for a few seconds. He avoids Eddie's eyes as he takes a swig of coffee, rubbing his hand against his mouth as he sets the cup back on the table. "Well, we weren't really happy for like, the entire last year of relationship. She wanted to move to LA and do the whole Hollywood thing, and I wanted to stay in New York City and keep doing improv, which she thought was a waste of time. And neither of us was willing to compromise for the other person." He pauses, as if waiting for Eddie to say something, but continues when Eddie keeps silent. "I think we both knew we were gonna call it, but were too chickenshit to officially pull the plug. So like six months before we officially ended things, she went out to LA to shoot a tv show and suggested that we should see other people while she was away, and I agreed"

“Right.” says Eddie, mentally calculating how close the start of that six month stretch would have been to when he and Richie had first met. “And did you?”

“Did I what?”

“See other people.”

“Oh. Yeah, a little bit.” Richie replies, tone of voice strangely uncomfortable. “But mostly I just hung out with my friends again and did lots of improv. I didn’t wind up missing Sandra at all. So when she came back, I officially ended it.”

“Oh shit. Good for you, bro.” Bro? Eddie cringes at how forced it sounds, like he’s turned into a frat boy in the last thirty seconds. Thankfully Richie doesn’t seem to notice.

“Yeah. I mean, she took it fine.” says Richie, “Honestly, she was probably just relieved to get rid of her dirtbag boyfriend.” He looks up at Eddie and laughs, smile not quite reaching his eyes, as he reaches for his phone. “Hey. Bill took a screenshot of my snap.”

“Hm?”

At that second, Eddie’s phone vibrates in his pocket. Eddie is unsurprised to see two messages from Bill. The first is a screenshot of Richie’s snap, Eddie’s furrowed brows peeking out over the menu, and the second is a simple *WHAT THE FUCK*.

“I think we’re going to give Bill an aneurysm.”

Richie sends him a wink, then turns back to his phone and keeps scrolling.

He doesn’t know why, but Eddie latches onto the unhappy look on his face from moments earlier. The idea that Richie might think of himself as a dirtbag makes Eddie want to throw something.

He uncrosses his arms and abruptly leans forward, making Richie look up from his phone. “You are not a dirtbag. I mean – look, okay, maybe you look like one sometimes.” Eddie admits, getting a genuine snort out of Richie. “But you’re not one. Trust me. Stan would never

be friends with you if you were, and neither would Ben. Plus there is no way in hell I would introduce a dirtbag to Bev as my boyfriend, unless I wanted to get a terrifying lecture on my poor taste in men.”

“Well jeez Spaghetti, you sure know how to make a girl blush.” Richie drawls. But Eddie can see a genuine smile fighting to emerge as he sets his phone back on the table.

A few minutes later, the waitress returns with two steaming platters of pancakes, both dredged in an obscene amount of whip cream. Richie waggles his brows as the plates are set down in front of them, picking up his cutlery with gusto. As Richie begins to dig into his pancakes shamelessly (“Gotta get ‘em while they’re hot, Spaghetti”), Eddie can’t help but think how oddly endearing he looks, this grown man who has somehow managed to get whip cream smeared all over his face on the first bite.

He soon realizes that this is exactly the kind of moment that a real boyfriend would want to capture. Reaching for his phone, Eddie swipes away Bill’s messages and opens up Snapchat, aiming the camera at Richie, who is in the middle of spearing a rogue piece of pancake with his fork. When he realizes Eddie is taking a picture, Richie holds the now skewered pancake up to his mouth, other hand giving an enthusiastic thumbs up.

Eddie takes the snap. It’s a perfect picture, Richie’s face dominated by a massive, childish grin, eyes dancing behind his trademark glasses. Before he can second guess himself, Eddie captions the snap *Meet Richie* and sends it to Bev.

Notes for the Chapter:

When you want to write a fluffy fake dating AU, but you just can't help but throw in some references to trauma.

Also, for those who might be are curious:

- Clint's Diner is 100% based on the old Capitol Restaurant in Inwood, Manhattan
- Bill Hader in *Knocked Up* is exactly how I imagine Richie when writing this story, fashion choices

included

- I know Bev is a fashion designer in canon, but I personally loved the idea of her taking control of the trauma narrative and using her own experience to help others

- Sandra's name is a nod to Richie's ex-girlfriend, Sandy, in the book; they're not supposed to be the same character though, because Sandy in the book is badass and Sandra is not

Thank you for all the lovely comments on the first chapter! They truly make my day.

3. Chapter 3

Eddie puts Bill out of his misery later that evening.

“You f-f-fucker!” His indignant voice echoes down the phone as Eddie flips open his laptop, phone nestled between his ear and shoulder, and launches the report he’s to present tomorrow at work. “Since B-B-Ben’s birthday??”

“Yup.” Eddie begins to aimlessly scroll through the presentation, already sick of it.

There's a sigh on the other end of the phone. “Fuck. I mean, obviously I’m n-n-not surprised that you two f-f-finally got together.” And that makes Eddie pause mid-scroll, because *what*. “I just c-c-can’t believe it took me s-s-so long to notice.”

While there's a part of Eddie that really, really wants to ask what the hell ‘finally got together’ means, a loud voice in the back of his head is shouting that this is not a road he wants to go down, not right now. It creates an odd, conflicted feeling in his stomach – one that he wants to get rid of immediately.

“Yeah well you’ve been pretty busy with your writing,” The words come out unintentionally biting and Eddie cringes, because this is Bill, not some asshole from work. “Don’t feel bad though, honestly.” He adds softly. “We’ve been trying to keep it really quiet. I only told Bev to stop her from setting me up on another blind date.”

There’s a long pause.

“S-s-sounds like B-Bev.” Bill says, and Eddie let’s go of a breath he doesn’t realize he’d been holding. “Does Stan know? He’s gonna be s-s-so stoked.”

“Did you really just use the word stoked to describe Stanley Uris.”

“It’s true though! He will b-b-be. He f-f-fucking hated Sandra.”

And well, that’s news to Eddie. “He did?”

“I mean, e-e-everyone kinda did.” Bill admits. “But Stan lived with R-r-riche when they were dating, so he r-r-really did.”

“Right, of course.” Frowning, Eddie tries to shift a figure down an inch on the currently opened slide – a decision which immediately sends the entire presentation into utter chaos, with text boxes flying of the screen and font sizes growing three times smaller. It makes Eddie want to stab his laptop screen.

As Eddie silently curses Microsoft Office formatting, he can hear Bill chuckle. “Man, you and Richie though. It’s about f-f-fucking time, huh.”

“Yeah, I guess.” replies Eddie, moving the figure back to its original location on the slide, because fuck this. “Speaking of about fucking time – how’s the script coping along?”

Instead of pointing out Eddie’s obvious attempt to change the conversation, Bill chat excitedly, revealing that Mike has offered to be his ‘sounding board’ for the edits to his ending. There’s no doubt in Eddie’s mind that, had it been Richie on the phone instead of him, the innuendo in that phrase would not have gone unacknowledged.

They talk for about ten more minutes, with Bill reminding Eddie, just as they say goodbye, how happy he is for him and Richie. But before Eddie can thinking about feeling guilty, his phone notifies him that he’s received a new snap from Richie Tozier.

Eddie opens the snap immediately. It turns out to be a video, opening up with a panning shot of a grimy, fluorescent lit public washroom before the camera is turned around and focuses on Richie’s face, his glasses askew. He obnoxiously blows a kiss to the screen just as the video ends. The caption reads ~*~wish you were here~*~.

Eddie snorts and sets the phone down without replying, turning back to his presentation.

Every Sunday evening, Richie and the rest of his troupe, otherwise known as TrashCity, host an improv show in a seedy bar on the Lower East Side. The rest of the Losers have all attended the shows on a semi regular basis, but Eddie’s never, because a) it’s on a

Sunday, and b) the locale is essentially a walking advertisement for Hepatitis.

Still, when Richie had casually thrown out an invitation to the show over pancakes, there had been a moment where Eddie had briefly debated saying yes. But then he'd remembered that his much slaved over report was being presented the next day and had quickly declined. If Richie had been disappointed, he hadn't shown it.

Declining was the right thing to do. It was the responsible thing to do.

And yet now, sitting alone in his apartment, Eddie finds himself barely able to concentrate on the presentation. Instead, all he can think about is the snap that Richie sent, about how Richie is probably on stage right now and how he, his supposed boyfriend, has no idea what that even entails. It leaves Eddie feeling guilty - this idea that, compared to the rest of the Losers, he could be so unfamiliar with one of the most important aspects of Richie's life.

After staring at the same powerpoint slide for five minutes, Eddie does what any good millennial would do: he goes to Youtube.

It's for research, Eddie tells himself as he slowly types TrashCity Improv into the search bar. The search returns several videos, most of them iphone camera recordings of the troupe's shows. Eddie scrolls through until he finds one that looks modestly professional and clicks on it.

At first, Eddie can't help but cringe as the troupe comes out on the makeshift stage to introduce themselves. Richie's voice sounds even more nasally than usual on camera, and his skin, already pale, looks damn near transparent.

But then the first audience prompt comes in, and all of Eddie's initial doubt melts, because here's the thing - Richie is funny. Like, really funny. Eddie doesn't understand how someone can be so quick on their feet, so at ease playing off the audience and his fellow troupe members. With every skit, he becomes a different person, dramatically changing his presence on stage. The shape shifting is so convincing that half the time Eddie forgets that it's Richie on his

screen.

Eddie immediately clicks on another recording and, before he knows it, it's 90 minutes later and he's watched most of the troupe's videoreel. The idea that Sandra could dismiss Richie's improv as a waste of time, when Richie looks so peace on stage, is infuriating. Realizing that his show must be over by now, Eddie picks up his phone and sends Richie a message before he can talk himself out of it.

I would just like you to know that your impression of Mr. Rogers watching porn for the first time is the most disturbing thing I have ever seen.

As the message sends, Eddie goes back to his inbox and, realising that he still hasn't responded to her last text, clicks on his conversation with Beverly. He'd received the text approximately five seconds after sending her his lunchtime snap of Richie: *WAIT your mystery man is Bill's cute comedian friend??? You sly dog Kaspbrak!!!!* He's replying with a single dog emoji when his phone vibrates with multiple messages from Richie.

I call bullshit

you lived with big bill for four years. no way that's the most disturbing thing you've seen

also ARE YOU WATCHING TRASHCITY VIDEOS???

I plead the fifth.

But had I watched them, I would say that you are clearly a mutant. Because there is no way a normal human being can do that with their vocal chords.

my mouth is capable of many wonders Spaghetti

Eddie feels his cheeks warm. If Richie was here in person, those words would be said in a smug tone, probably with an overdramatic waggling of his eyebrows.

Your vocal chords are in your throat, dipshit.

Also, I told Bill about us.

and? did he spontaneously combust?

I could feel the reverberations through the phone.

Eddie hesitates before continuing.

Actually he said he wasn't all that surprised we'd finally got together.

The grey typing bubble appears and disappears multiple times in the corner of the screen. Eddie instantly regrets sending the message. What was Richie supposed to say to it anyways? He hastily sends out another text.

But that's probably just Bill reading too much into things.

Did you tell Stan?

This time it's mere seconds before Richie replies.

Yup

And?

Richie's response is a screenshot of his conversation with Stan. The two are debating whether or not to go to trivia on Thursday night, a monthly Loser's tradition, when Richie sneaks in a *I'm seeing Eddie now btw* at the end of one of his messages. Stan's reply is a simple **Obviously.**

And that's when Eddie decides it's time to go the fuck to sleep.

*

"I can't believe you're celebrating with mac and cheese."

Richie's leans against the kitchen counter, arms crossed, and watches unimpressed as Eddie dumps the second box of Kraft macaroni and cheese into a pot of boiling water.

After setting the timer for seven minutes, Eddie turns to him with a

quirked eyebrow. “I’m sorry, are you complaining about getting a free meal?”

“Who, me? Never.” says Richie, widening his eyes. “All I’m saying is that if I was the one who had just kicked ass on a presentation at work, the celebration would involve a lot more than some noodles in a box.”

Eddie sighs as he stirs the pasta with his wooden spoon, mildly envious of the noodles that are swirling lazily under the boiling water.

Because Richie just doesn’t get it.

The thing is, Eddie’s mother never let him have boxed macaroni and cheese growing up. According to Sonia Kaspbrak, convenience food was the cuisine of neglected children, and there was no way she was going to let her son, with his delicate immune system, go into premature organ failure because she’d been an inattentive parent.

When Eddie stupidly admitted to trying it once, Beverly having brought some in for lunch that day, Sonia had broken down crying and locked him in his room. Ear pressed against the door, Eddie could hear Sonia yelling at Beverly, accusing her of trying to kill her son, when she’d come to the apartment looking for him.

So Eddie hadn’t tried Kraft macaroni again until university, hidden away from his mother’s snooping nose. Eating an entire bowl of the stuff had been a revelation, the first step in a slow, laborious process of rebellion. It was one of the best feelings Eddie’s ever had. And so now, whenever he wants to celebrate something, he does so with a box of salty, chemical laden macaroni and cheese.

But Richie really, *really* does not need to know all that.

Which means that Eddie just throws him an eye roll and says “Yeah, well, I like to save the hookers and blow for my weekends.” He lifts up the wooden spoon, poking it against Richie’s chest, “And I did not say I kicked ass. I just said it went well.”

“Yeah. And when you said it, you were blushing like a little school

girl.”

Eddie groans as he buries his face in his hands.

“See! Blushing again, like a little ass-kicker.”

When Eddie looks up, Richie has shifted so that he’s facing him dead on, hip pressed into the counter and head cocked. His hair, just on the far side of too shaggy, is falling into his eyes. Eddie feels an intense desire to run his hands through it.

He clears his throat and turns back to the stove. “So are you gonna join on Thursday?”

“For trivia? Not sure.” shrugs Richie. “Do you even want me there?”

“I – yeah, sure. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, I seem to remember you threatening to stab me multiple times the last time I went.”

At Richie’s knowing smirk, Eddie flushes, because right, that had happened. “Well it’s not my fucking fault you decided to turn every answer into a fucking penis joke!” He grumbles defensively, before quickly adding. “But I was being a brat that day. You should come, honestly. It’s – it’ll be fun. It’s supposed to be Star Wars themed.”

“Ahhh. My time to shine, it is then hmmm?” says Richie, putting on a Yoda voice. “Watched those movies too many times, I have.”

Eddie cringes, “Oh god. Don’t tell me you’re one of those bros who thinks Empire Strikes Back is the best in the trilogy?”

“Um, I don’t think that Spaghetti, I *know* it.”

“Well no, you can’t know that, because you’re wrong.”

What follows is a debate between the merits of the Empire Strikes Back and A New Hope, with Richie arguing for the former and Eddie the latter, while the kitchen timer counts down slowly in the background. The timer goes off as Eddie is breaking down the cinematic influence of the cantina scene.

When Richie abandons the kitchen to take a leak, Eddie turns back to the stove and begins to meticulously prepare his macaroni, empty boxes kept neatly to the side for possible reference. He runs through his remaining arguments for A New Hope as he drains the pasta and carefully adds the butter, milk, and cheese mix to the pot, stirring with each addition.

The destruction of the Death Star is running through Eddie's head when he goes to divide the now prepared pasta between two empty bowls sitting on the countertop.

"Wait, stop. What the fuck are you doing?"

Richie's horrified voice cuts through his reverie. Eddie pauses, pot in his hand, and turns to Richie, who has rapidly approached the stove. "What does it look like I'm doing, dipshit?"

"We can't eat it like *that*."

"Like what?"

"Like my fucking grandma made it."

Eddie slams the pot back on the stove and places his hands on his hips. "Fuck you, man. I made this according to the directions."

"Eduardo, Eduardo," tuts Richie. "Those directions are wrong."

"No. The directions are right - that's why they're printed on the goddamn box."

If Richie hears the murderous tone in Eddie's voice, he chooses to ignore it. "Naw, naw, man. Trust me. You've gotta doctor it up a bit." He turns towards the kitchen cupboards. "Where are your spices?"

"Top left." says Eddie automatically, "Wait, why do you need spices?"

"To elevate your macaroni and cheese. Obviously." The spices clatter and clang as Richie picks his way through them, making himself right at home in Eddie's cupboard, before he lets out a small whoop. "Here! Chili powder, the most essential. Adds a certain *je ne sais*

quoi.”

Eddie narrows his eyes, “I don’t want *je ne sais quoi* in my macaroni.”

“Too bad.” Richie replies in a sing song voice as he flips open the container and dangles it over the pot, giving it a generous shake.

No chilli powder comes out.

Releasing a huff of annoyance, Richie tries shaking the small container with more aggression, again to no avail. The chilli powder sits resolutely stuck at the bottom of the container.

Watching Richie’s forehead crease in frustration, Eddie feels a strong urge to comment on how this must be a sign from the gods, that Kraft macaroni and cheese is clearly not something to be trifled with. But before he can say anything, Richie gives another insistent shake, and immediately jumps back, yelping in surprise, as the lid and entire container’s worth of chilli powder empty into the pasta.

“Whoops?” says Richie, looking up at Eddie with round eyes.

Eddie raises his eyebrows, his lips fixed in a thin, unimpressed line. “Did you just destroy my macaroni? My *celebration dinner*?”

The stern tone causes Richie’s mouth to drop open. “I – No, no. It’s fine, it’s fine.” He runs his hand through his hair, gaze flitting back to the pot. “We can totally save it. Do you have a spoon?”

Without saying anything, Eddie walks over to the cutlery drawer and pulls out a spoon, which Richie quickly snatches and begins using to haphazardly scoop some of the chilli powder into the sink. He’s clearly flustered - a departure from the confident, easygoing image that’s so familiar to Eddie.

It’s oddly endearing.

As he watches Richie dart between pot and sink, spoon in hand, a thought elbows its way into Eddie’s head and he steps over to the open cupboard, grabbing the closest available spice. It’s a rather dusty looking container of curry powder. He gently shakes the container, lid still on, in a half hearted attempt to loosen up its stale

contents.

“Just making sure that what just happened here isn’t going to be a repeat fucking occurrence.” Eddie scoffs when Richie throws him a curious glance.

Looking sheepish, Richie returns to the task at hand. A smirk threatens to emerge on Eddie’s face as he unscrews the lid of the container and shuffles over to where Richie is standing. He leans over the pot of macaroni, still drenched in chilli powder, and lets out a weary sigh. “My celebration dinner.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Don’t fret Eddiekins.”

“Eddiekins? What are you, my fucking mother?”

Richie looks up from the pot and winks. “No. But I’ll be your daddy if you ask nicely.”

At that, Eddie widens his eyes innocently. “Well then it’s a good thing I’m not very fucking nice.” He then proceeds to dump a generous amount of curry powder into the macaroni.

“The fuck!” bellows Richie. He glares at Eddie, who lifts his palms up in mock remorse. “I just spent like, half an hour trying to fix that!”

“That was like 30 seconds, dumbass. Besides – I was just improving it.”

“You are a fucking cretin, Spaghetti.” says Richie, waving the now useless spoon in the air. “How dare you ruin my good intentions. I’m never doing something nice again.” Eddie can see a light bulb go off in Richie’s head as he speaks, and soon the other man has broken out into a wolfish grin. “But speaking of improving -”

The spoon clatters to the floor as Richie lunges past Eddie and reaches for the spice cupboard. Within seconds, an absurd amount of dried oregano has joined the curry and chilli powders. “There, even more improved.”

A giggle threatens to escape from Eddie’s lips, but he pushes it back down his throat and lifts his chin defiantly. “Oregano, Richie?

Really?”

“Mhm. Really Eduardo. Maybe a little cinnamon too.” Richie replies, reaching for said spice.

As the cinnamon is dumped into the macaroni, Eddie grabs some more containers. “Might as well add some paprika while you’re at it. And maybe a bit of dill?”

“Well obviously. We can’t forget the dill, that would be a tragedy.”

“A goddamn tragedy.” Eddie agrees. He glances briefly at the spice cupboard, then back to Richie, who waggles his eyebrows.

Soon enough, the macaroni contains at least a dash of every spice in the apartment. In a fit of insanity, Richie and Eddie bound over to the fridge and begin to empty it of condiments, adding heaping spoonfuls of black bean sauce, ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise to the pot in between fits of laughter.

By the time Eddie’s fridge has been suitably emptied, the pasta has taken on a slime like consistency, its colour an unappetizing sludge brown. Eddie almost gags as he glances at their creation, which Richie is now stirring with the look of a proud mother. “There is no way in hell I’m eating any of that.”

“What!” Richie squawks, turning to Eddie in horror, “Spaghetti. This is the first meal we’ve made as a couple. You have to eat it. It’s a symbol of our love.”

“Richie, it looks like fucking diarrhea.”

“A symbol of our goddamn love.” Eddie looks back down at the pot, then up at Richie, before wrinkling his nose, which prompts a cackle out of the other man. “You fucking pussy. Can’t even eat a bowl of macaroni.”

“What, like you could eat a fucking bowl of that shit.”

“Is that a dare, Spaghetti?”

“It’s not a dare, it’s a statement of fucking fact.”

The corners of Richie's mouth quirk up. "Oh? Would you like to place a wager, Spaghetti?"

Eddie's first instinct is to say no, because he's not a goddamn child. But there's another instinct, which is much, much louder, that wants to be right. "Fine. You give up before finishing the bowl, you have to stop calling me Spaghetti."

A look of genuine surprise crosses Richie's face. "What! But that's like, our thing."

"Nope, no it's not." Eddie insists, "You can call me by actual fucking name."

"Fine, fine. You fucking Debbie Downer" Richie grumbles, giving the pasta a much less enthusiastic stir than just moments earlier. "If I finish it though, you have to watch Pretty Woman with me."

Eddie purses his lips, suspicious. "What? That's it?"

"I'm sorry, would you like me to come up with something else? Because I can if you really, really want me to, Spaghetti."

"No, no. Pretty Woman's fucking fine." Richie sets down the spoon and lifts up the pot, pouring half the sludge into one bowl. As he reaches for the second bowl, Eddie hastily stops him. "Hey! I'm still not eating any of that shit."

"Nope. You have to. New rule: Wager is null and void if you don't at least try it." And dammit, Eddie really should have made Richie shake on it earlier. Noticing Eddie's hesitation, Richie begins to whine in an overly high pitched voice "Spaghetti, Spaghetti, Spaghettiiiiii."

Jesus Christ, as if Eddie could forget that that nickname is the actual worst. "Fine. But if I die from this – "

"Then we can be buried together, like the big, gay boyfriends we are."

For some reason, that thought isn't very comforting.

Eddie watches Richie generously fill the second bowl and set it on the breakfast bar along with a spoon. Before they go to sit down, Eddie grabs two larges glasses of water, because there is no way in hell he and Richie aren't going to want to wash this shit down.

It's quiet in the apartment as the two of them sit down and tentatively lift their spoons. The silence means that Eddie can clearly hear his noodles noodles let out a large, squidgy squelch as he scoops some up with his spoon. Fighting the urge to vomit, he glances over at Richie, who has a similar expression of dismay. He then turns to Eddie and knocks their spoons together, letting out a mocking "Bottom's up."

It's the worst thing Eddie's ever tasted. As soon as he's swallowed the pasta, which is somehow simultaneously slimy and gritty, he swipes his glass of water and takes a large swig.

"Oh my god, that's fucking disgusting." Eddie groans, rubbing the back of his hand across his mouth and glancing over at Richie, who is shovelling another spoonful of noodles into his mouth. "Dude. What the FUCK."

Richie blinks at him. "What? You don't like it?"

"There is no way in hell you could think this tastes good."

"Not everyone's a picky little princess like you, Spaghetti."

"That's not being picky, that's having fucking taste buds." Richie shrugs, but as Eddie watches him closely, a tiny wince flashes across his face when he swallows another mouthful. It's enough for Eddie to throw his fist in the air triumphantly. "See! I knew it. I fucking knew it. You think it's shit."

Richie sniffs, taking another spoonful of pasta. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I can literally see you cringing!"

"Lies and slander."

Over the next ten minutes, Richie slowly but surely makes his way

through the bowl of macaroni, his face becoming progressively paler with each bite. For his part, Eddie goes to cupboard and grabs a bag of barbeque chips, munching on them mindlessly as he watches Richie's progress like it's breaking news.

Eddie can't decide if he's horrified or amazed when Richie finally pushes his empty bowl across the breakfast bar and makes his way over to the couch, smug expression on his face. "It's Pretty Woman time, Spaghetti."

Richie's already pulled up Netflix by the time Eddie joins him on the couch. As Richie flicks through the comedy section, a series of stand up specials flash across screen, reminding Eddie of the improv show he missed the previous night.

"Hey, I didn't get a chance to ask. How did your show go?"

The smug expression on Richie's face falters. He fixes his eyes on the television screen, jaw tense. "It was fine."

"...Fine?"

"Yeah, fine." When Eddie doesn't reply, Richie continues, his voice taking on a guarded quality as he clicks on the search option and types out the word pretty. "Well, I dunno. I was distracted. It wasn't my best night. Nothing to fucking cry about."

The tone catches Eddie off guard, and he feels weirdly wrong-footed, not sure whether to push back and ask Richie more questions or let the conversation lie. Once Eddie decides to ask why he was so distracted, Richie lets out a loud groan, "What the fuck? It's not on here anymore. This is some grade A level bullshit."

If Eddie knew Richie better, maybe he would push harder about the improv show, because clearly something is up. But Eddie's still not even sure if he and Richie are friends, so he takes the out and leans back into the couch with a lopsided grin. "Guess it's not really a classic then."

"Shut up, Mr. New Hope." Richie gives a dismissive wave of his hand. "We'll just have to watch it another night, after I've obtained it

through less legal channels. You're lucky I'm between PA gigs right now, got all the time in the world for my dear Eduardo."

He continues to browse through Netflix, hovering over Brooklyn Nine Nine until Eddie gives his seal of approval. When Richie presses play, Eddie can't help but wonder how the two of them must look to an outsider – him sitting ramrod straight, hands folded in his lap, while Richie lazes just half a foot away, ankles crossed on the coffee table, with a lazy smirk on his face.

They probably look nothing like a couple.

Eddie chews his bottom lip. "Do you think they'll buy it? On Thursday?"

"Seems like they already do."

"Yeah, but – but maybe they won't buy it in person, when we have to actually act like a couple."

"Sure they will. We just have to do what feels natural." says Richie. He throws his arm across the back of the sofa, just behind Eddie's shoulders, before furrowing his brows, "Except for, you know, the whole not actually dating thing."

Eddie lets out a loud snort as Jake Peralta's murder suspects begin to sing I Want It That Way. Soon enough, he and Richie have fallen into easy conversation, the television being relegated to background noise. They share first job horror stories and pet peeves, swap insults over favourite X-men (Nightcrawler for Eddie, Wolverine for Richie) and rant about the weirdness that is 90s nostalgia. Eddie's shocked at how comfortable it all feels, Richie warm beside him, his head thrown back in laughter in response to a particularly ridiculous college-Bill story.

At the start of the fourth episode, Eddie's head begin to droop, the exhaustion of a long day at work finally taking hold. Too tired to overthink things, he lifts his feet up onto the couch and curls into Richie, head resting on his shoulder. He can't help but think how much cosier Richie is in comparison to his couch cushions. As he throws his arm casually around Richie's waist, he can feel Richie

stiffen beside him.

“Eds?”

Eddie's eyes flutter open at the new nickname, shocked at how hesitantly it comes out of Richie's mouth. On another day, Eddie might smack him and snap that Eds, much like Spaghetti and Eduardo, is not his fucking name. But at this moment, more relaxed than he's been in a long time, Eddie can't bring himself to mind.

“I'm just doing what feels natural.” He sighs, face pressed against Richie's shirt.

Richie lets out a breath and wraps his around Eddie's shoulder, pulling him in so tight that they're practically intertwined. The Brooklyn Nine Nine theme song is playing in the background when Eddie feels fingers gently card through his hair. Seconds later, a pair of lips brush against the crown of his head.

This time it's Eddie's turn to sound hesitant. “Rich?”

He's almost asleep by the time Richie finally replies, his voice nothing more than a whisper. “Just doing what feels natural.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm not as happy with this chapter, but I hope y'all still enjoy it! And yes, I did name Richie's improv group a combination of Trashmouth and Second City, because I am not creative.

Also it looks like this story is going to be eight chapters, rather than five if I'm following my outline, since it's already chapter three and Bev still hasn't shown up! I've just been busy and have had to write shorter chapters than originally intended.

She shows up next chapter though, I promise.

4. Chapter 4

Richie comes over two days later with his laptop and an HDMI cable to watch *Pretty Woman*. As soon as the movie starts, the two of them wind up in much the same position as the previous night: Richie at the end of the couch, ankles crossed on the coffee table, with Eddie curled up beside him.

Except Eddie doesn't fall asleep this time around. Instead he's awake for all of Richie's running commentary, and all the incessant joking about possible parallels between their current fake romance and the movie. The jokes only get worse when Richard Gere's character is revealed to go by Edward, a detail which, going from from his shriek of delight, Richie had forgotten.

Eddie meets every one of his jokes with a roll of his eyes or a muttered insult, a smothered laugh occasionally thrown into the mix. What he doesn't do, however, is move from his spot next to Richie. If anything, he leans in closer at each ridiculous comment, arm tightening around Richie's chest.

It's awkward when they say goodbye. The previous night, Richie had practically snuck out when Eddie had fallen asleep on the couch, ruffling his couch in a playful attempt to wake the other man up. This time though, a much more lucid Eddie walks him to the door. They stand looking at each other, Eddie's hand in his pockets as Richie rolls back and forth on his feet, biting his lip.

Just as Eddie debates if he should just go in for a hug, Richie leans in and presses their lips together. It's a dry, chapped kiss that's over before Eddie can even close his eyes. When Richie pulls away, Eddie's briefly tempted to drag him back in, a voice in the back of his head shouting that can't be it, but he's stopped by Richie's sheepish, awkward grin.

"Sorry, I just – just figured maybe we shouldn't do that for the first time in front an audience."

Eddie clears his throat. "Right. Yeah, good call."

“Yeah. See ya, Eds.” Richie throws him a wink before turning on his heel. As Eddie closes the door to his apartment, he can hear whistling coming from down the hallway.

*

Star Wars trivia is the next evening.

The initial plan had been for Eddie and Richie to arrive together, but that had gone to shit when Eddie’s boss had called him in for a last minute meeting at the end of the day. A last minute meeting that had managed to last over two fucking hours.

Which is how Eddie finds himself with sweat dripping down his neck on the subway, still dressed in his suit from work. The subway is sweaty at the best of times, grumpy New Yorkers packed in like sardines, but it’s especially so on this mid August day. With the bodies of three different people pressed up against him from ankle to chest, Eddie raises his eyes heavenward in a silent plea for relief. That plea is cut short when the questionable stain on the ceiling directly above him comes into view, because what the FUCK is that.

Eddie’s mind instantly goes back to the study revealing that there over 15 000 life forms identified on the New York Subway, including bacteria linked to the bubonic plague. Images of blackened limbs and gas masks are running through his head when the train finally pulls up to his stop. With a quiet “Thank fuck”, Eddie extricates himself from the other commuters and launches himself onto the platform, beelining for the stairs.

The sweltering New York air has never been more appealing as Eddie comes out of the station. At the end of the block, the bar’s sign announcing trivia night shines like a beacon, drawing him in.

The bar is packed – not New York subway during rush hour packed, but close. A generic rock song plays through the speakers while Eddie weaves his way through the crowd, feeling distinctly out of place in his fancy suit. He curses his boss for not giving him enough time to get home from work and change.

As Eddie reaches the back of the bar, his face immediately breaks out

into a wide grin at the sight of all the Losers at their usual spot. Everyone's already arrived and the table practically groaning under the weight of nachos and bottles of beer, one of which sits in front of the empty chair that's sitting empty between Richie and Bill.

"Hey guys, sorry I'm late." Eddie announces as he walks up to the table.

His arrival is greeted by shouts of welcome from all the Losers except for, interestingly enough, Richie, whose wide eyes travel briefly up and down Eddie's body before landing on his face. It's at that moment Eddie realises Richie's never seen him in a full suit before, since he always changes into more comfortable clothes as soon as he gets home from work.

"Cat got your tongue, Tozier?" He smirks, preening a little at the attention. Maybe being stuck late at work wasn't the worst thing to happen.

Richie quickly recovers and puts on a lazy expression. "Not at all. Just thinking that germ-infested commutes suit you."

"Fuck you, man." Eddie chuckles as he takes off his suit jacket and tie and drapes them both over the back of the chair. As he sits down and begins to roll up his sleeves, there's a loud gulp from Richie's chair. "So, did I miss anything?"

"Nope."

"What! Yeah, he did, Richie." Ben scoffs, taking another bite of nachos.

"Unless you already t-t-told him?"

"Told me what?" Eddie wrinkles his nose and looks over at Richie.

Richie's eyes are fixed on the beer bottle in front of him, hands playing with the label, while Stan looks on at him proudly. "I, uh, I got a call today. I have an audition for the Daily Show next week."

Eddie nearly jumps out of his seat. "You WHAT?"

“Yeah. I guess those producers who came to my show liked what they saw.” Richie shrugs. Eddie’s mind instantly races back to Richie’s awkwardness on Monday - so that’s why Richie had been so distracted at improv.

A part of Eddie really wants to ask Richie why he hadn’t told him about the producers on Monday. But he shakes away the confusion when he sees how falsely casual Richie looks, as if he’s expecting Eddie to be unimpressed.

Acting on instinct, Eddie sets his hand on Richie’s thigh, which is jittering up and down, and leans in to give him a brief kiss. Across the table, Bill lets out a wolf whistle, while Ben’s mouth drops open in surprise. If Richie’s shocked by the kiss, he doesn’t show it, merely quirked an eyebrow as Eddie pulls away, a smile on his face.

“That’s fucking amazing, Rich.”

“It’s just an audition, Eds. Nothing to pop a boner about.”

Before Eddie can reply, Ben’s hesitant voice cuts through the table. “Hey, um, sorry guys. But did I – did I miss something?”

“Hm?”

“Did anyone else notice that Eddie and Richie just kissed?”

Richie leans back in the chair and smiles smugly. “Excellent observation as always, Haystack.” When Ben continues to look confused, he glances back at Eddie and puts on a stage whisper. “Didn’t you tell him?”

“What – no. I thought, I thought you did.”

“Why the fuck would I tell him?”

“You said yesterday that you were texting him!”

“Well that just sounds like you made a bit of an assumption, Eds.”

“A fucking assumpt –“

Stan cuts Eddie's bubbling outrage short. "They're dating."

"What! Seriously? Since when? How – did you guys all know?"

As everyone around the table nods, Richie turns to Eddie, horrified. "Wait, you told Mike, but not Ben? How *dare* you."

"Oh, so who's making a fucking assumption now?" Eddie retorts.

"But then how –"

"I t-t-told him."

Richie lets out a loud, dramatic gasp. "You gossipy wench, Denborough."

"He d-d-dragged it out of me!" Bill protests, gesturing to Mike, who is sitting quietly beside him, a serene expression on his face.

Ben continues to stare at two of them, wide eyed, as the Star Wars theme loudly fills the bar, informing the crowd that round one, the first of two hour long rounds, is about to begin.

The only time Eddie threatens to stab Richie is when he begins to write down a very vulgar answer to the question "What does AT-ST stand for?". As they squabble over the pencil, throwing insults at each other, Mike quietly grabs the answer sheet and writes out the correct response without either of them realizing. The rest of the round goes smoothly, the questions suspiciously easy.

As soon as the first round finishes, Richie stands up and announces that he's going to grab drinks for everyone, with Mike jumping to help. Before they've even left the table, Ben's leaning over to talk to Bill, voice hushed. It all looks rather conspiratorial, and Eddie turns to make a comment on it to Stan, instantly stiffening when he sees the other man already watching him with raised eyebrows.

"..Yes?"

"So, you and Richie huh?"

Eddie fidgets, instantly nervous. "Yup. Me and Richie."

Stan sighs. “Look, I know he can be like, the world’s biggest idiot, but he’s my oldest friend and he’s – he’s the best. I know he never takes himself seriously, but you should, okay?”

The irony of getting the talk from Stan makes Eddie wince, since technically he and Richie aren’t serious at all - in fact, they’re not even real. But it’s not like he can tell Stan that. “I will.” He says, hesitating before he continues, “He’s definitely... not been what I expected.”

“Sounds like Richie.” Stan smiles, and Eddie can practically see the affection radiating from him.

“Hey Eddie.” Bill interrupts, leaning across the table while Ben fidgets beside him. “R-r-remind me – when does Bev get here?”

“Saturday afternoon. What’s up?”

“Well Haystack and I were thinking we c-c-could all get together at Great Hill on S-S-Saturday after I drop Mike at the airport. You know, if you g-g-guys are free.”

“It’s totally fine if you aren’t. No pressure.” Ben hastily adds. “And like, even if you’re free, you don’t have to come. Just if you guys want to. I – yeah, I’d just think it’d be fun. Plus it’s right by the Loch and Bev said she’s never been there before and...” His sentence gradually fades out.

Stan’s mouth is twitching at the corners, threatening to break into a smile. “Planning on doing some wooing there, Ben?”

“What! No.” Ben yelps. Looking from Stan to Eddie to Bill, all of whom are wearing the same amused expression, he hesitates. “Well, only if she wants to.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Eddie snorts, before breaking out his phone and sending a text to Beverly: **Spotted - Young architect bursting aneurysm at possibility of picnic in the park with visiting PhD student. Details to follow.**

As Eddie sends the text, he can hear Richie whining the background as he returns with Mike and the beers.

“C’mon man, just one little guy.”

“I can’t Richie, that would be illegal.”

“But it would be for a worthy cause.” Richie cries, setting the tray on the table.

Mike rolls his eyes with a warm smile as he makes his way back to his chair. “I don’t think airport security would agree with you on that.”

“What the fuck are you whining about?” Eddie asks, reaching for his beer and taking a generous swig

“Mike’s saying he won’t bring me back an alligator from Florida.”

The reaction around the table to Richie’s statement is decidedly mixed. Stan groans, Bill chuckles, Ben lets out a small squeak, and Eddie spits out his beer, looking at Richie in horror. “What! Why – why do you want an alligator?”

“So I can be crazy Florida man for Halloween, obviously.”

“Wouldn’t that be animal abuse?” Ben asks, genuinely curious. “Can you even keep an alligator as a pet?”

Richie stares pointedly at Mike. “People in Florida do.”

“And we all know Florida’s the paragon of good life choices.” Stan mutters, which prompts a snicker out of Eddie.

When the second round of trivia gets going, it proves to be much harder than the first. At every question, a table or two groans at their inability to figure out the answer. Yet somehow, the Losers manage to come out unscathed, their relative strengths combining to make an unstoppable force.

Ben knows an absurd amount about the technical details of the filming, while Mike has read most of the books. Bill and Eddie have both seen the films an embarrassing amount of times, often watching them together back in university, and are able to rattle off the scripts by heart. And Richie, well, Richie just seems to have bizarre facts

about the Star Wars tucked into his back pocket. He knows answers to questions that Eddie didn't even exist.

Throughout it all, Stan watches them quietly, never volunteering an answer to a question. When he does say anything, it's during a debate between two responses. Eddie can't help but wonder if he knows the answer to every single question and is just watching the rest of the Losers duke it out for the pleasure of it all.

Once the round is complete, Eddie instantly whips out his phone and checks to see how many of their answers were right. He's shocked to see that they haven't gotten any of them wrong. Announcing it to the group, they all storm the bar and call for another round of beers to toast their success.

It's a few minutes later when the host walks back on stage.

"Well, it looks like at the end of round two, we have a tie! Coming in at first place we have the Losers and the Bothan Bros." A group of men with man-buns and waxed moustaches let out a cheer two tables down. "Now, as you all know, when it comes to a tie, we go into a sudden death round. I'll ask a question, and, if you write down the wrong answer, the team is immediately eliminated. All the rest of you, feel free to join in and write down your best guess."

"Now, are you all ready?" The host asks. The room falls quiet and the Losers all lean in, their fingers itching. "It has been rumoured that there's a hidden code on Darth Vader's control panel. What language is this hidden code in? And what is it thought to say?"

Everyone exchanges glances, desperately looking into each other's eyes for the answer. Bill and Eddie both shrug helplessly. As Mike bites his lip and Ben frowns, Richie lets out a wail, bringing his head down onto the table in dismay.

With everyone in various states of morning, Stan quietly slides his hand across the table and reaches for the paper. As if in slow motion, he picks up the pencil and writes an answer on the sheet, tongue poking out between his teeth. No one has a chance to see what he's written, the host announcing the end of the round just as Stan lifts the pencil off the paper.

He looks up from the paper to see five sets of eyes staring at him. "Well, I guess it's time to finally thank my parents for those Ancient Hebrew classes."

"Ancient Hebrew?"

"Yup." Stan says smugly. He glances around quickly, ensuring that all the tables around them have also had their answer sheets collected, before speaking again. "It says: His deeds will not be forgiven, until he merits."

And that's how The Losers wind up winning.

*

Beverly arrives that Saturday afternoon, a blur of red and black as she tackles Eddie at his apartment door. Without hesitation, Eddie sweeps his arms around her, pulling Beverly in so that tight that her feet lift right off the ground.

"My ribs, Kaspbrak." She shrieks, the laughter in voice indicating that her ribs are really in no such danger. As Eddie sets her back down, Beverly lets out a loud sigh and a kiss to his cheek. Eddie can practically feel her smile on his skin. "Fuck, is it good to see you."

"Back atcha Marsh." He squeezes her again, a bit more gently this around, before reluctantly dropping his arms to his side.

With an affectionate pat to Eddie's shoulder, Beverly toes off her shoes and strides into the apartment, socked feet sliding against the hardwood. Her hair bounces when she turns around to Eddie with a grin. "You smell good, by the way. Did you put on cologne for yours truly?"

"Psh, don't flatter yourself Marsh." Eddie watches as Beverly sloughs off her leather jacket and tosses it on the breakfast bar before making her way to the fridge. "Nah, it's just been hot as balls here this summer. I swear I'm starting to sweat out soap, I've had to shower so much."

A pair of raised eyebrows peer out over the refrigerator door. "That's why you've had to shower so much?"

The middle finger is all Beverly gets in response and her head disappears back into the fridge with a cackle. Realizing that he needs to text Richie, Eddie pulls out his phone and scrolls down to their latest conversation, a debate from the previous night about the coolest planet in the solar system that had gone on for far too long. He flicks through it briefly, chuckling, before he types out a quick message.

The Eagle has landed.

When he looks up, Beverly's sitting on his breakfast bar, ankles crossed, with a large glass of orange juice in her hand. Eddie's immediately transported back to Maine, to hanging out in his kitchen while Beverly ranted about Greta fucking Bowie, perched on the kitchen counter with her heels bouncing against the cabinets.

Some things never change.

"I have a surprise for you, by the way." Beverly announces. Eddie looks up at her, sceptical, and she holds up her hand in defense. "It's a good one, I promise!"

"Mhm?" Eddie's phone vibrates with Richie's reply: *commence operation I love dickin down edward kaspbrak?*

If Beverly sees the flush rising in Eddie's cheeks, she ignores it, pointing to her backpack with a grin. "It's in there."

Eddie hesitates, eyes flicking from the backpack to Beverly's pleased face. "If you've hidden something gross –"

"I haven't! I swear on your comics."

And, well, that settles it. With a huff, Eddie walks over to the backpack and picks it up, setting it on the breakfast bar beside Beverly, who quickly unzips the front pocket and begins to dig through it. She soon triumphantly pulls out a small paper bag. "I guarded this with my life, Kaspbrak. You better fucking appreciate it."

She holds the bag out to Eddie, who takes it from her gingerly. With narrowed eyes, he opens the bag, jaw dropping when he see what's

inside. He looks up at Beverly, whose face has broken out into a huge grin.

“You didn’t.”

“Oh, I fucking did. It’s why I got the later flight - I had to get you one.”

Eddie can feel his heart stutter in his chest. “You got – you got a later flight so that you could get me a doughnut?”

“It’s not just a doughnut Kaspbrak, it’s the doughnut.”

And it’s true, it is *the* doughnut – it’s a buttermilk old fashioned from Do-Rite Donuts. Every single trip Eddie has taken to Chicago has concluded with him and Beverly sitting on Navy Pier, each eating a buttermilk old fashioned while they stare out at the water, talking about what’s to come next.

“I can’t believe I doubted you.” Eddie leans back against the breakfast bar, his hip pressing into Beverly’s thigh as he pulls the doughnut out of the bag, inspecting it lovingly.

“You’re forgiven.”

Taking a bite of the doughnut, Eddie’s eyes roll back in ecstasy, because fuck that’s good. He can see a smug expression spread across Beverly’s face as she takes a last gulp of her orange juice, clearly pleased with herself.

As Eddie finishes the doughnut, Beverly hops off the counter and strides past him, grabbing her suitcase and dragging it into his bedroom. As soon as Beverly walks into his room, Eddie walks over to the coffee table and pushes it into the corner of the room, leaving a large, open space in front of the couch. A space promptly taken up by Eddie’s duvet, which Beverly emerges with from his bedroom seconds later.

While Beverly sets up her laptop on the couch, Eddie sends a quick message to Richie, confirming the plan to meet at Eddie’s place before heading down to Great Hill together. A reply of *roger dodger* comes in just as Beverly selects one of her many Spotify playlists to

run in the background. As they lie down beside each other, staring at the ceiling with their sides pressed together, the strum of an acoustic guitar begins to fill the room.

Within seconds, they're talking about everything and nothing all at once, from whether Chicago or New York pizza is the best to who might be the next Democratic presidential nominee. Eddie finds out more about Beverly's thesis, discovering that her prof back in Chicago wants to collaborate with another researcher at Columbia, and that Beverly's going to meet up with her while she's here in New York, because why the fuck not?

At one point, Eddie goes to the kitchen and pours them both two massive bowls of Corn Flakes, which he and Beverly eat sitting cross legged on the duvet. When the cereal is finished, they set the bowls on the floor and lie back down beside each other, this time with Beverly curled up along Eddie's side. It's then that she admits, ever so quietly, that she's excited to see Ben later that day. Eddie's whoop of delight is met with a soft punch to the arm.

Richie comes up more than once, which really isn't a surprise, given Beverly's long standing interest in Eddie's love life. What is a surprise though is how easy Eddie finds it to answer Beverly's questions about him, as if his brain has registered far more about Richie than even he had realised. His rants about Richie's ridiculous Hawaiian shirts and bizarre Star Wars knowledge, which leave Beverly giggling into his shirt, come out more affectionate sounding than usual.

Eventually Eddie gets a text from Richie, informing him that he'll be at the apartment soon.

When Eddie relays the message to Beverly, she rolls off him, stretching her limbs lazily like a cat. "I should get out of these clothes before he gets here, I smell like fucking airplane."

"Yeah, I really don't think you need to worry about Richie's sense of smell."

"You only get to make a first impression once, Kaspbrak." Beverly chirps as she stands up from the duvet and makes her way to the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

As if on cue, there's a knock at the front door. It's so quiet that Eddie can barely hear it above Beverly's music and for a second he wonders if he's going insane. A few seconds later there's another knock, this time more insistent, and he scrambles off the floor to open the door.

Richie's standing on the other side, hands shoved in his pockets while his teeth worry at his bottom lip, eyebrows furrowed. His hair looks freshly washed, and his shirt, less audacious than usual, is suspiciously devoid of wrinkles. When Richie notices Eddie frowning at him, his face quickly rearranges itself into a smirk. "Hiya Eds."

"Hey." Eddie scrunches up his nose while Richie strides past him into the apartment, looking around. "When you said soon I didn't think you meant –"

Before Eddie can finish, Beverly walks out of the bedroom, dragging a well worn Lollapalooza t-shirt down over her head. As her head pops out of the collar, she spots Richie and freezes, shirt half pulled down over her midriff as her eyes widen. Richie lets out an exaggerated gasp and staggers backwards, hand over his chest.

"It has been six weeks, Eduardo." He declares, voice drenched in despair as Beverly finishes pulling the shirt down, grinning. "Six goddamn weeks."

Eddie rolls his eyes. "Oh please, like I could even get Bev."

"Hey! Of course you could." Beverly scolds, before turning to Richie and pulling him in for a brief hug, which he returns easily. "Nice to finally meet you, Richie."

"Right back atcha, you filthy, filthy home wrecker." Richie smiles, untangling himself from the hug to walk over to the kitchen and grab the kettle, which he promptly fills with water. "And Eds, I think you're selling yourself a little short. Have you seen yourself in a suit?"

Eddie crosses his arms as he leans against the fridge, feeling uncomfortable. "I see myself in a suit everyday. It's not that exciting."

“Has he always this blind Bev?”

There’s a sigh from where Beverly’s now sitting at the breakfast bar.
“Always.”

“Well, it’s becoming a real problem.” Richie grumbles.

Eddie’s struck by how completely at home Richie is in the apartment, turning on the kettle before he rifles through the cupboards, on the lookout for coffee beans. To the casual outsider, Richie probably looks as much a part of the apartment as the comic book collection or well worn couch. It all leaves Eddie feeling distinctly uneasy.

“It always has been. I mean, have you seen the shorts yet?”

There’s a moment of silence, the kettle boiling ominously in background, before Richie whips around, a look of pure, childish excitement spread across his face. “The sh –“

“Nope!” Eddie interrupts, hastily pushing off the fridge. “We do not discuss the shorts.”

“But –“

“No.”

“It’s okay Richie, I have pictures.” At Eddie’s petulant squawk, Beverly shrugs. “Hey, technically showing isn’t discussing.”

Richie looks at Eddie and grins wickedly. “Ohhh I like her, Eds.”

“Traitor.” Eddie mutters as he makes his way behind Richie to grab himself a glass of water. He runs his hand across Richie’s back as he goes, noticing how Richie’s muscles tense just slightly under his touch.

As he fills glass under the tap, Eddie can see Richie gesture towards Beverly’s shirt. “So, you’re a Lolla person, I take it?”

“Every goddamn year.”

“Ugh, fuck you! I’ve always wanted to go.” Richie groans, before

looking over at Eddie. “What about you Eds? You ever been?”

Eddie snorts. “I can barely survive a subway ride without wanting to murder someone, Rich. How the hell would I survive a music festival?”

“You really should join sometime, Eddie.” Beverly suggests, eyes glinting mischievously. “Your shorts would fit right in.”

“Hey!”

Richie raises his eyes heavenward. “God give me strength.” He lets out a loud sigh, then looks back over at Beverly, “So what’s the best set you’ve seen then, in all your Lolla wisdom?”

As Beverly answers, Eddie can’t help but roll his eyes a little bit, because fucking hipsters. But it’s also undeniably nice to watch Richie and Beverly chat excitedly to one another, waving their hands in the air as they discuss musicians that Eddie hasn’t even heard of, let alone listened to. The fact that their conversation has nothing to do with Eddie’s adolescent clothing choices is a small benefit.

At some point in the conversation, Beverly’s phone starts loudly ringing on the breakfast table, it’s abrasive ringtone almost causing Eddie to drop his glass.

“Oh shit, it’s my aunt. I promised I’d call her when I got here – Hi Annie!” She mouths the word sorry as she opens the front door and steps out into the hallway, leaving Richie and Eddie alone in the kitchen.

The air feels suddenly heavy. Eddie can feel Richie’s eyes on him, staring as he places his glass on the counter, hands sweaty.

“She seems nice.” Richie gestures to the door with his head, “Bev, I mean. I can see why you’re friends with her.”

Eddie watches as Richie takes a drink of coffee, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot, feeling vaguely uncomfortable. “I, uh – yeah.” He cringes, brings up a hand to rub at the back of his neck. “Yeah, she’s – she’s rad.”

Richie just hums in agreement, takes another drink of his coffee

before setting it down next to Eddie's glass of water. The only sounds in the apartment are the playlist still running in the background and Beverly's voice, faint in the hallway as she chats to her Aunt.

Just as Eddie opens his mouth to say something, a new song comes on, Richie's eyes widening in recognition. "Holy shit! I love this song." At Eddie's confused glance, he continues, surprised. "You don't know it?"

"Nope. It's Bev's playlist, not mine." Eddie pauses, listening in to the song, which is folksy and relatively upbeat. "It sounds nice though."

"It is nice," Richie clarifies as he makes his way even closer to Eddie and reaches for his hands. Lifting one of them up onto his shoulder, he takes the other hand in his own, entangling their fingers.

Eddie's breath hitches as an arm settles around his waist, "What are you doing?"

"Dancing with you."

"I – I can't dance."

Richie grins and pulls Eddie closer. "Good, cause neither can I."

It's clumsy at first. There's not a lot of room to move in the kitchen, and Eddie has no idea what he's supposed to do with his feet, stepping on Richie's toes more than once. But if Richie's bothered, he doesn't show it, dragging Eddie with him as he gleefully hops back and forth to the beat.

Any awkwardness melts away as Eddie watches Richie dance, and soon enough his feet are moving on their own accord, grip tightening around Richie's shoulders. Grinning at Eddie's newfound enthusiasm, Richie begins to sing along to the song, voice obnoxious as he lifts his arm to give Eddie a twirl.

Eddie attempts to return the favour, but it doesn't quite work, what with Richie having a good five inches on him. But he doesn't have time to regret it, not with the way Richie's eyes crinkle with laughter as he folds himself awkwardly under Eddie's arm.

As the song begins to fade out, Richie raises his eyebrows and dips Eddie down dramatically, a smirk on his face. Eddie begins to roll his eyes, but it's cut short when Richie lifts him back up and pulls him in tightly by the waist, their chests separated by mere inches.

The smirk quickly drops off Richie's face as the room falls silent, the only sound their breathing. Eddie swears he can see Richie's eyes flick briefly down to his lips before he audibly swallows, arm tightening around Eddie's waist.

As if on instinct, Eddie wraps his hand in Richie's shirt and begins to pull Richie towards him, closing the distance between them. It's tentative enough that Richie can easily pull away if he wants to. But instead he lets himself be dragged down, eyes flickering closed as Eddie's lips brush up against his.

It's not like the other kisses they've shared, kisses that have ended as soon as they've begun. This one is slower, more intentional, Richie bringing his hand to Eddie's cheek and tilting his head just slightly to deepen the kiss. Eddie tightens his grip on Richie's shirt when he feels Richie's lips open up against his, which *holy shit*, and he's about to do the same when there's a cough from behind him.

Jumping back as if he's been burned, Eddie whips around to see Beverly leaning against the fridge, a knowing smile on her face. "Sorry to interrupt, boys, but I just got a text from Bill making sure we were still coming. So we should probably be on our way."

When Eddie turns back to Richie, a smile is plastered across his face, but it doesn't reach his eyes. The hand that was cupping Eddie's face just seconds earlier is now wrapped around his mug of coffee, knuckles white.

"Righto Bev." He replies, taking a swig of coffee while he pointedly avoids Eddie's gaze. "Musn't leave Big Bill waiting. Let me just take a leak and then we can be on our merry way, right Eds?"

He sets the mug down and claps a shoulder on Eddie's shoulder, walking past him towards the bathroom while Eddie stays rooted to the spot, staring blankly ahead. Eddie's still standing there when Beverly comes up behind him and wraps her arms around his waist,

muttering 'so fucking cute!' into his ear.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for the lovely comments! They seriously make my day.

A few random things of note:

- I really like buttermilk doughnuts, can you tell?
- there is a genuine debate about whether or not there is a hidden message in Darth Vader's control panel (about which I am personally very very indifferent)
- Meet Me In The Woods by Lord Huron is the song I've been listening to on repeat writing this fic, and it's 100% what I imagined them to dancing to at the end of the chapter

5. Chapter 5

When Eddie comes home from work on Monday, he's decidedly on edge.

To say it's been a day is an understatement. The subway's computer system had crashed during morning rush hour, leaving Eddie stranded in a crammed, dirty train car for over an hour. He'd then crashed into another commuter while running up the station's stairs, already late for work, and gotten his suit drenched in iced coffee. And if that wasn't enough, Jeremy was once again to be Eddie's intern, his other supervisor having gone on some unexpected 'stress leave'.

But if Eddie's being honest, the real reason he's so on edge is because he hasn't heard from Richie in over twenty four hours, a first since Stan's party.

Things between them had been notably off kilter after their kiss on Saturday. While the two of them had put up a good front at the Park in front of their friends, Eddie had noticed that Richie's smile never reached his eyes. Eddie's plan to improve things by going to TrashCity's show on Sunday with Beverly and Bill had been foiled when there'd been a flood at the venue, cancelling the show. Richie had then declined to join for drink's at Bill's place, citing a need to prep for his audition.

Eddie knows he shouldn't be annoyed. After all, it's not like he and Richie are actually dating. Yet Richie's managed to insert himself into Eddie's life with alarming efficiency, and his sudden absence leaves Eddie uncomfortably agitated.

As Eddie storms into his apartment, he's immediately thankful that Beverly's out tonight with old friends from Northwestern, leaving his apartment blessedly empty. In an attempt to wash the day off him, he jumps into the shower, trying to practice the deep breathing exercises he learnt from a therapist several years earlier as the water washes over him. Four seconds in, four seconds out, four seconds in, four seconds out - focus on the diaphragm.

When he gets out of the shower, Eddie grabs some leftover Pad Thai from the fridge and settles down on the couch with an episode of Brooklyn Nine Nine, mindlessly eating noodles as the team hunts for a missing Cheddar.

Unfortunately he's completely unable to focus on the episode, checking his phone every two minutes for a text or snap from Richie. As the credits roll, Eddie decides to give in and quickly scrolls to Richie's contact information before hitting the call button.

Richie picks up on the second ring.

"Eds?"

Eddie runs a hand through his hair, tries to put on a casual voice. "Hey Rich."

"... What's up?"

"Nothing, just uh –" Eddie can hear music playing in the background. As he strains to listen, he realizes it's the song that he and Richie danced to in the kitchen. "Wait, where are you right now?"

"Uh, my room, why?" And oh. As Eddie tries to process what that might mean, the song ends and Richie lets out a soft chuckle, "Eddie, is this a very, very poor attempt at phone sex?"

Eddie jumps off the couch, sputtering, "What! No, fuck off."

"I'm just kidding Eds, no need to get those panties in a twist."

"I was just – just calling to see how the audition stuff was going."

"Ah, okay." There's a long pause, and Eddie begins pacing around the apartment, gnashing his teeth together. "Um, it's going fine, I guess? Everything's written now, but it might be shit for all I know. I was gonna test the rest out on Amy tonight but her girlfriend just surprised her by coming back from London early, so I'm thinking that's a bust now."

Amy is Richie's roommate and fellow member of TrashCity. Eddie doesn't know much about her aside from the fact that she works at an

anarchist bookstore in Queens and has a snake called Jeffrey.

“Oh shit. Well, I’m guessing Amy’s pretty happy about that.”

“If the sounds coming from her room are any indication, then yes, she most definitely is.”

Before Eddie knows it, words come tumbling out of his mouth, unbidden. “Well, if she’s so busy, why don’t you come over and test it out on me?” There’s a sharp intake of breath on the other side of the line and Eddie hastily continues. “I mean, Bev’s out all evening and it’s not like I’m doing anything.”

When Richie replies, he sounds sceptical. “You want to hear my material?”

“I – well, yeah, why wouldn’t I?”

“Um, because it’s probably shit?”

The Youtube clips Eddie watched earlier in the week flash through his mind, “I seriously doubt that. Besides, if it is shit, then showing it to me now means you have more time to fix it before the audition, right?” A beat. “Plus I have beer.”

“Well if you have *beer*.”

Richie arrives forty five minutes later, hair plastered to his forehead, with a backpack slung over his shoulder. The smell of cigarettes trails behind him as he walks into the apartment. “Jesus Christ, it’s muggy as all fuck outside.”

While he sets his backpack on the floor, Eddie fills a glass with water and passes it over to him. With a grateful “Cheers, Eds” Richie takes a long chug of water, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as sweat drips down his neck. Eddie finds himself glancing away, feeling strangely voyeuristic.

“So how was your day then, Eds?” Richie asks as he sets the glass aside, scrubbing the back of his hand against his mouth.

“Well,” Eddie begins, before turning to the fridge and pulling out two

bottles of beer. As they migrate over to their respective corners on the couch, he begins to dive into the day's events, his consternation over Jeremy's inevitable return leaving Richie a cackling mess.

Once Richie's recovered, he sets his laptop on the coffee table and begins to scroll through a word document, babbling about what sort of material the Daily Show producers usually ask for at auditions. His foot jiggles up and down on the floor as he speaks, his words coming out jumbled and high pitched. It's obvious that he's nervous.

Eddie shifts so that he's directly facing Richie, his back pressed up against the arm rest. Folding his hands in his lap, he looks expectantly at the other man, who loudly clears his throat.

"Okay, here goes nothing." Richie takes a deep breath and turns to look at Eddie. He opens his mouth, but no words come out, and he abruptly closes it again before burying his hands in his hair and grimacing. "Fuck, I don't know if I can do this in front of you."

Eddie blinks at him, confused. "What? Why?"

"I dunno Eds, it's embarrassing." Richie shrugs.

"Don't you do this shit in front of strangers every week?"

"Yeah, exactly, strangers."

And Eddie doesn't really know what to say to that. "But Rich, it's just me. I'm not like – like, this big, important person. I'm a fucking risk analyst who collects comic books."

Richie just scoffs and turns back to his laptop, hands fiddling with his shirt. As Eddie watches a flush rise up Richie's neck, his fingers twitch with a desire to wrap his arms around him, to kiss the discomfort away. He doesn't let himself though, the residual awkwardness from Saturday still heavy in his mind.

Instead his eyes cast around the apartment, trying to find something that might ease Richie's nerves, or at least make him smile. Eventually his gaze settles on the door to his bedroom, and an idea comes to him.

“Gimme one sec.” He mutters, jumping off the couch as Richie narrows his eyes, suspicious.

He slips into his bedroom, closing the door behind him as he walks over to the tiny closet and begins to shift through its contents. There’s a voice in his head yelling *abort mission*, but Eddie pushes it away, focusing instead on how uncomfortable Richie had looked sitting on his couch.

A minute later, Eddie takes a deep breath and pulls a pair of sunglasses down over his eyes. Opening his bedroom door, he slides through it dramatically, holding his hands out in an attempt to maintain his balance. As his socks glide across the hardwood, Eddie keeps his eyes fixed on the floor, eventually coming to a stop in front of the coffee table.

When he looks up at Richie, a triumphant smile on his face, he’s surprised to see that the other man is staring at him, slack jawed, rather than grinning in amusement.

“Rich?”

Richie’s mouth hangs open for another five long seconds before he finally replies. “I – I’m sorry, are those – are those the –”

“Yup. These are them, in all their glory.” Eddie grins, because he is, indeed, wearing *the shorts*. They’re ridiculously small, and bright purple, with the letters D.H. embroidered on the right leg in yellow stitching. “Figured if you were worried about being embarrassed, I’d embarrass myself too, even the fucking field or whatever.”

Eddie can feel Richie’s eyes boring into him as returns to his original spot on the couch, “Well I am definitely not embarrassed anymore. Just very, very distracted.”

“They’re just shorts, Richie.” Eddie gestures to the laptop as he crosses his legs and takes off the sunglasses. “So, now that I look like a fucking idiot, lay it on me.”

Richie shakes out his head, lifting his hands in the air. “Nope, sorry Eds, I just – I just need a moment to process this. Can you explain

how the hell you ended up with shorts like those?"

Eddie rolls his eyes. "I ran track in high school, and these were part of the uniform. My mom made me quit junior year but I kept the shorts."

"And did you happen to grow like, ten inches, since junior year?"

"Nope."

At that, Richie's eyes widen comically, "So they were that short in high school?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Jesus Christ, were your track meets secretly gay pride parades?"

The idea of a gay pride parade in Derry prompts Eddie to let out a snort, "Not quite."

"Right, right, fucking New England." Richie replies before smirking. "Well man am I glad I never ran into you at a track meet. Can you imagine? Little sixteen year old me trying to run the 100 meter dash with a giant fucking boner?"

Eddie's hands come up to cover his face, which he can feel turning red. "Oh my god, fuck off."

"The chafing alone would have been killer."

A groan from behind Eddie's hands.

"But maybe a boner would have been useful, like, aerodynamically?" When Eddie's looks up from behind his fingers, Richie's staring at him, eyebrows quirked, "Given me a little extra thrust?"

"That doesn't even make – wait, did you ever even run track?"

"Fuck no. I wasn't that big of a loser."

He lets out a loud cackle as Eddie's toe digs aggressively into his ribs. When Eddie continues to poke at him, Richie swings his own legs up

onto the couch, and it devolves into an all out war, toes poking into ribs and ears and armpits. It's a war which, Eddie soon points out, is incredibly unfair, given that Richie's legs are several inches longer than his, and therefore have a much greater swatting range.

Once a truce has been reached, which arguably takes much longer than it should have, Richie grabs his laptop and proceeds to dive into his sketches for the audition. Eddie's pleased to see that somehow, some way, the ridiculous shorts interlude has worked, because Richie's able to get through the sketches without bumbling, hands flying through the air as he gets more and more enthusiastic with each passing minute.

He can't help but feel a bit shocked at how smart Richie's material winds up being. It's not that Eddie's ever thought Richie was stupid, but his writing is razor sharp, funny and vulgar while remaining surprisingly nuanced. It's exactly the sort of thing that Eddie could see being on a program like the Daily Show, a realization that makes his heart swell.

Richie's just ending his final bit when Beverly crashes into the apartment, hair and leather jacket completely soaked through. It's only then that Eddie notices the rain pounding against his window, wind howling aggressively in the background.

"Holy shit," Beverly announces, beelining for the bathroom as a trail of water takes shape behind her. "I didn't know New York was getting a god damn hurricane today."

As the bathroom door closes, Richie looks at Eddie with a grin. "I thought Gingers could predict the weather?"

"Only the ones with souls, unfortunately."

When Beverly returns, there's a towel wrapped around her head and a second one in her arms, which she uses to quickly wipe up the puddles left on the floor. Water mopped up, she turns towards the couch, jaw promptly dropping.

"Oh my god. The shorts!" Beverly runs up to Richie, putting her hands on his shoulders and looking him dead in the eyes, "Have you

had an aneurysm? Are you going to make it?"

"I have officially ascended to a higher plane." Richie drawls.

"They're magnificent right?"

"Truly the clothing of Gods."

Eddie lets out a loud, frustrated groan, as Beverly settles onto the coffee table, ankles crossed. "Oh my god guys, they're fucking shorts."

"Yeah," Richie says, "And I bet I would have figured out I was a big ol' bi way sooner if we had been at the same high school, seeing you in them every god damn day."

Eddie flips Richie off before turning to Beverly. "So how was your evening then?"

"Oh, it was fine. We ate, we drank, we planned the downfall of the patriarchy. You know, *just girly things*."

Richie leans back against the couch, hands behind his head, and grins wolfishly. "And did a certain architect happen to come up at all?"

"Once or twice." Beverly sniffs daintily. "We wound up coming to the conclusion that he must be a serial killer."

When Eddie squawks in protest, Beverly dives into her rationale, arguing that Ben is simply too perfect not to have bodies hiding under his baseboards. He's handsome, he's smart, he's generous, he's sensitive, there has to be a catch. Eddie's argument that maybe the catch in this situation is just Ben himself, but Beverly just shrugs in response.

Richie lifts his computer onto his lap as they continue to bicker back and forth. When he announces that he's googled "Signs You're Dating A Serial Killer", which has apparently returned a surprising number of articles, Eddie and Beverly quickly move from their spots to crowd beside him and look at the top result.

It's an article entitled **Signs The Guy You Matched With Is A Serial**

Killer, and the signs are as follows:

1. He keeps messaging you with weird codes and riddles.
2. He's got WAY too much going for him, but he still manages to make you feel bad for him.
3. He's strangely obsessed with your bodily functions and organs.
4. He says cannibalism is "not as bad as everyone thinks"
5. He knows about your whole life before you tell him anything about you.
6. He brings you to places that blast the A.C., but he doesn't offer you his jacket when he gets cold.

After reading through it, Richie looks at Beverly and raises his eyebrows, "I didn't realize January embers was about your pancreas."

"It is a quality fucking pancreas."

"Okay, nope, nope, this is bullshit." Eddie interrupts, waving his hands. "There's no way Ben wouldn't offer you his jacket if the A.C. was blasting. He's fucking done that for me before!"

Richie wraps his arms around Eddie and pulls him backwards until Eddie's back is half pressed against his chest. He nuzzles his nose into the back of Eddie's neck. "Well that's just because you're adorable, Eds,"

"Yeah Kaspbrak, I mean he literally told me and Richie that cannibalism wasn't so bad on Saturday."

"He's a vegetarian!" Eddie cries, wriggling against Richie's arms, which only tighten their hold on him.

"And so was Hitler."

"Dammit Rich."

With Richie's hands otherwise occupied, Beverly grabs his laptop and returns to the original Google search. "I wonder what else they have

on here.”

She soon clicks on another article, this one talking about what astrological signs are most likely to be serial killers. Eddie lets out a triumphant A-ha! when they scroll through the entire article and see that Gemini, which is Ben’s sign, isn’t on the list.

“Well thank god. I mean, we all know astrology is never wrong.” Richie jeers.

As Beverly scrolls back to the top of the article, Eddie elbows him in the side, “Wait, Rich. Aren’t you born beginning of March?”

“You know my – I mean, yeah, it’s March fourth. Why?”

“So doesn’t that make you a Pisces?” Eddie gestures to the laptop, where it says **Pisces (February 18 – March 20)** at the top of the screen.

Beverly lets out a loud gasp as she begins to read what’s written on the screen, “Topping the list of notorious serial killers was, rather surprisingly, the typically sweet and dreamy Pisces.”

“I’m – I’m a dating a murderer.”

“But at least I’m sweet and dreamy?” Richie waggles his eyebrows.

Beverly snorts before standing up from the couch and walking over to the kitchen. Taking advantage of the abandoned space on the couch, Richie hauls himself and a protesting Eddie further up onto the cushions.

“Bev! Save me! I’m being murdered!”

“I’m sorry, Eddie,” Beverly sighs as she pours herself a glass of orange juice, “Your arrogance has been your own undoing.”

“Fuck! No, I’m – arrrrrrgh.” Two hands dig into Eddie’s ribs and begin to tickle him. As Eddie feels electricity jolt through his body, he begins to cackle uncontrollably, wriggling on the couch. “Murderer! Murderer!” He cries out between laughs, before rolling on his side and shoving his hands up Richie’s shirt in a desperate

attempt to tickle him back.

Richie lets out a hilarious, high pitched yelp as Eddie's fingers come into contact with ribs. And soon enough it's all elbows and knees, the two bumping awkwardly into one another as they each try to get the upper hand. When Richie lands one particularly good poke, Eddie's body instinctively rolls away, causing him to fall off the couch with a shout.

He lands on his back, wedged between the coffee table and the couch. Richie's head peers over the cushions, thick frames magnifying the concern in his eyes, "You okay, Eds?"

"Yup, yup, I'm fine." Eddie waves him off dismissively. "I knew you just wanted me for my kidneys,"

Richie puts on an awkward smile as he stands up from the couch. "Well, I'm gonna take that as my cue to leave."

"Wait, you're not staying the night?"

Eddie sits up as soon as Beverly asks the question. From his new angle, he can see Richie's weight shift slightly from foot to foot. "Uh, nope. Wasn't going to, no."

"Well, I would seriously reconsider that." Beverly gestures outside at the thrashing rain. "Unless you want to drown on your way to the subway."

"Yeah, but –"

"If it's me you're worried about, don't be. I've been sleeping on the couch anyways, so it's not like you'd be kicking me out of bed or anything."

Richie turns around to look down at Eddie, who's still sitting on the floor, knees now drawn up to his chest. "Eds, you made your guest take the couch?"

"What? No! I –"

"Kaspbrak actually tried to take the couch instead, but I overpowered

him.” Beverly smiles sweetly, taking a sip of her orange juice.

Richie lets out a small, half hearted chuckle at Beverly’s comment, before focusing on Eddie. He bites his lip, eyes clearly asking a question. Before he says anything, Eddie hazards a glance outside, where a bolt of lightning instantly illuminates the sky. A clap of thunder vibrates through the apartment as he turns back to Richie and whispers, “You should just stay, Rich.”

“I – okay, yeah sure.”

Eddie stands up and brushes off his shorts, before pointing at Beverly, “But if you hear any blood curdling screams in the middle of the night, please come check on me, because I’m probably being murdered.”

“I don’t know.” Beverly swirls the remaining orange juice back and forth at the bottom of her glass, “How much do organs go for on the black market these days? I’ve got some mean student loans.”

Richie’s eyes instantly light up at her words, “I dunno. Which one do you think would be the most expensive? The brain?”

“I’m thinking the heart. I mean, they haven’t figured out the whole brain transplant thing yet.”

“Yeah but, Bev, the brain is like – a fucking brain.”

It’s on that note that Eddie announces he needs to brush his teeth. As soon as Eddie reaches the bathroom, he closes the door behind him, leaning up against it and letting out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

Richie and Beverly’s voices echo through the door as Eddie stares at himself in the mirror, cringing. He looks ridiculous, dressed in his bright purple shorts, his mouth fixed in a thin line, eyebrows pinched. Feeling embarrassed, Eddie drops his gaze as he walks up to the sink and reaches for his toothbrush, loading it up with toothpaste.

As Eddie begins to brush his teeth, all he can think about is the fact that tonight he’ll be sharing a bed with Richie, former thorn in his side and current fake boyfriend. He wonders how it will feel to fall

asleep with the warm weight of Richie lying next to him, or what it would be like to wake up beside him.

An image begins to push its way into Eddie's mind. It's of Richie, lying on his stomach in Eddie's bed, watching Eddie with a sleep soft smile, glasses abandoned on the nightstand. His hair is mussed and he's not wearing a shirt, the prominent knobs of his spine disappearing underneath the sheet. The thought makes heat pool in Eddie's belly, and he can feel his body starting to tense up, muscles twitching, while he begins to imagine trailing his knuckles lightly down Richie's back.

You need to be careful Eddiebear.

Eddie freezes as the words interrupt his thoughts. They have his mother's voice, gentle and haunting, deceptive in their affection. Shaking his head in an attempt to will the words away, he resumes brushing his teeth, thinks of Richie nuzzling against his neck with a whispered "Morning Eds".

Dirty thoughts make for dirty boys Eddiebear.

His mother's words are louder this time, more insistent. Eddie lets out a frustrated groan around his toothbrush. He doesn't want to think about her right now, he really, really doesn't.

And you know what happens to dirty boys, Eddiebear? Bad things.

Spitting out the toothpaste, Eddie sets his toothbrush down and grips the edges of the counter, his palms sweaty. He closes his eyes and begins to breathe deeply (four seconds in, four seconds out, four seconds in, four seconds out - focus on the diaphragm). As his mother's words come into his head again, Eddie tries to imagine them as clouds, obstructing his vision for just a moment before drifting away - permanently impermanent, as his therapist would say.

It takes several rounds of breathing for his mother's voice to fade into the background. Once it's receded, Eddie rinses his toothbrush and puts it away, too worried that images of a shirtless, inviting Richie will come back into his head again if he continues brushing his teeth.

As he steps out of the bathroom, Beverly's making the couch into her bed, a pile of sheets on the floor beside her, while one of her playlists plays quietly from her laptop. Eddie walks up to her and gives her a soft kiss on the cheek, which she welcomes with a warm hug, before he says goodnight and heads to his room.

The door has been left open an inch. Eddie hesitates as he pushes it open slowly, immediately hit by the sight of Richie standing with his back to him. He's looking through one of Eddie's bookshelves, bouncing on his heels and humming a tune to himself that Eddie doesn't recognize.

"You'd better not hum in your sleep." Eddie mutters, closing the door behind him.

Richie turns around at the sound of Eddie's voice, startled, before putting on a smirk. "I don't, I swear. Now snoring on the other hand." He runs a hand through his hair. "You promise it's okay that I'm staying, Eds?"

"Yeah, of course. I wouldn't say you could if I didn't mean it."

"Okay, okay, cool." Richie replies, nodding awkwardly, before turning back to the shelf he was looking at earlier. "So, this is your dad, I'm guessing?"

Eddie doesn't have to look over to know what Richie is looking at it. It's a small, faded picture, stolen from his childhood home the day he left for college. In the photo, a young Eddie is sitting on Frank Kaspbrak's shoulders, a wicked smile on his face while Frank, who's eyes are crinkled mid-laugh, holds onto his legs tightly. "Yup, that's him."

"Jesus, you guys could be fucking twins!" Richie declares as Eddie makes his way over to the shelf. He lifts the photograph off the shelf and waves it in Eddie's face. "And look at how adorable you are, Eds. A fine fucking cherub. How old are you there?"

"Um, well he died when I was five. So I'm probably around four?"

Richie winces and Eddie cringes, unsure if he's just waded into too

personal territory. “Shit, right. He looks – he looks nice, Eds.”

“Yeah, he was. He was the best.”

“What was his name?” Richie whispers, eyes moving from the photograph to Eddie’s face.

“Frank.” Eddie smiles. “His name was Frank.”

“Well, he was a handsome chap, Eds, that’s for damn sure. I can see that chiselled jawlines are a Kaspbrak family special.”

Eddie snorts before he gestures lamely to the door. “Well this chiselled jawline is going to head to bed. There’s an extra toothbrush in the bathroom, top drawer on the right, that you can use.” At Richie’s confused look, he continues. “Bev always forgets her damn toothbrush, so I stock up before she comes. But she actually remembered to pack it this time around.”

“Ah, gotcha. Alright, well I’ll see you here in a mo.”

As Richie goes to brush his teeth, Eddie stands hesitating at the side of his bed, trying to figure out what he should go to sleep in. Normally he sleeps in just his underwear, but maybe Richie would find that weird, coming back to the room to find a shirtless Eddie waiting from him in bed? But then wouldn’t it also be weird if Eddie didn’t change at all and just stayed in his shorts and t = shirt?

Eventually Eddie changes into an old, threadbare t-shirt and takes off his shorts, getting into bed in his boxer briefs. He snuggles under the covers just as Richie steps back into the room, a nervous expression on his face as he slides the door closed behind him. “Did you want me to sleep on the floor? Because I can if you –“

“What? No, don’t be an idiot. Just don’t spoon me and we’ll be fine.”

“I can’t make any promises. I get pretty lonely in my sleep.”

When Eddie just rolls his eyes in response, Richie makes his way over to the bed, beginning to unbutton his Hawaiian shirt. In an attempt to be respectful, and to preserve his own dignity, Eddie turns on his side, putting his back towards Richie. He stays in that position until

he feels a dip in the mattress beside him.

As he rolls onto his back, Eddie immediately wonders if God is playing a cruel joke on him, because even out of the corner of his eye, he can tell that Richie is lying in the exact position he'd been daydreaming about in the bathroom. Although thankfully in this version he's wearing a wifebeater, rather than being shirtless.

When Eddie glances to the side, he can see Richie watching him, cheek pressed into the pillow while his glasses sit perched on the nightstand. He swallows thickly.

"I'm uh – I'm gonna hit the light."

"Sure thing, Eds."

Eddie wonders if Richie has the chance to notice his flustered expression before the room descends into darkness. If he does, he thankfully doesn't comment on it.

They lie there in silence for sometime, just inches away from one another, Eddie on his back and Richie on his stomach. Listening to Richie breathe softly beside him, Eddie reflects back on something the other man said earlier in the evening. He attempts to shove it away several times before eventually breaking the silence, the curiosity becoming too much to ignore.

"So when did you figure it out?"

"Hm?"

At Richie's muffled response, Eddie continues, his voice directed at the ceiling. "You said – you said you would've figured out that you were, you know, way earlier if we'd been at the same high school. So – so when did you figure it out?"

"That I was a big ol bi?" Richie rolls onto his side so that he's directly facing Eddie, a movement which Eddie instinctively mirrors, their faces now just a breath apart. He can smell the toothpaste on Richie's breath. "Uh, sophomore year of college, after I broke up with my girlfriend. I'd kind of, I dunno, suspected before that, but didn't know for sure until then. You?"

“I came out to Bev freshman year.”

“Impressive.”

Eddie scoffs, because his sexuality journey deserves anything but praise. “Yeah, and then she left and I hopped right back into the closet until I was 23.”

“Oh?” Richie raises his eyebrows, prominent enough to still be visible in the darkness of the room.

“Yeah, I mean,” There’s a pause as Eddie tries to think of what words to use. “I guess I always knew I was gay – I just thought that if I tried hard enough, I wouldn’t have to be anymore.” He casts his eyes down to the mattress in an attempt to avoid looking at Richie, not wanting to know what kind of expression is on his face. “I know, I know, I’m a fucking coward.”

“That’s not – that’s not being a coward.”

“I think my ex-girlfriend would disagree with you.”

When Richie replies, he speaks with a level of passion that catches Eddie off guard, prompting him to look up, eyes wide. “Yeah well, no offense, but I’m guessing your ex-girlfriend didn’t grow up as a closeted kid in small town USA, so she can go fuck herself.”

“I guess. Thanks Rich.” Eddie whispers. There’s a moment where he thinks he can see Richie’s hand lift off the mattress and edge towards his own. But then he blinks and Richie’s hand is back where it was before, as if it had never moved. Convinced that he’s started to seeing things, Eddie rolls onto his back and sighs. “Whatever, it all works out in the end, right Rich?”

“Right, Eds.”

And if Richie’s words sound a little sadder than normal, well, Eddie just tells himself that that’s the exhaustion talking.

Notes for the Chapter:

Ohhh when you start writing the opening scene of

your chapter and it winds up turning into the *entire* chapter.

A few things, as always:

- the two articles I referenced about serial killers/signs are actual articles I found on the internet. Read at your own risk.
- as someone who has had to go to therapy for anxiety/intrusive thoughts, I did my best to represent Eddie's strategies in a realistic way; I do realize however that what he does may not be everyone's solution
- it is remarkably easy to write being horny for Richie Tozier when you have a big ol crush on Bill Hader
- thank you again for all the wonderful comments, I can't even.

ALSO! I can't believe I'm writing this, but the lovely milky-beans on tumblr made some glorious art (!!!) based on this fic. Please check it out [here](#) as I go back to shrieking in delight.

6. Chapter 6

“Richie’s crazy about you.”

“Oh?”

“Yup. The way he just lights up when he talks about you, it’s just –“ Beverly makes the gesture of a chef’s kiss, ignoring Eddie’s sceptical expression.

They’re walking towards Bryant Park, where a free showing of Jurassic Park is scheduled for later in the evening, the combination of free and Jeff Goldblum something that none of the Losers could pass up.

Eddie had made the mistake of leaving Beverly and Richie alone in his apartment after he’d snuck out to work that morning, foolishly forgetting that Beverly would waste no time interrogating his ‘boyfriend’ at the first opportunity. And if the snaps Eddie had received were any indication, the two of them had spent the entire morning together, cooking scrambled eggs in his kitchen while singing along atrociously to nineties one hit wonders.

“I mean, you should see him when he talks about pancakes.” Eddie shrugs, artfully dodging another harried looking pedestrian on the sidewalk.

“If he looks like that when he talks about pancakes, then I will eat my fucking hat.”

“We can arrange that.” says Eddie. And then, “Wait. Did you bring a hat?”

“I will buy a hat, and then fucking eat it.” Beverly sniffs while Eddie’s phone vibrates with a message from Richie: *Almost there. You?* “But honestly, Kaspbrak? Take the compliment. It’s goddamn adorable, the way he talks about you.”

Eddie sends out a quick and stuffs his phone back into his pocket, entrance to the park now within sight. “That’s – yeah, he’s a good

guy. I'm glad you like him."

"I do, I really fucking do." Beverly looks over at Eddie with a knowing grin. "Plus it helps that every time you look at him, you look like your heart is going to burst through your chest."

"What! No I do not."

"Do too, Kaspbrak. You look like a goddamn loony tune!"

"I do not look like –"

Before Eddie can reply, Richie bounds up beside them from the opposite direction, hair sticking out wildly. "What's this about Looney Tunes?"

"Oh nothing." Beverly smiles sweetly while Eddie sends daggers her way. "Nice to see you could make it Rich."

"Obviously. Who the fuck would pass up dinosaurs?" Turning to Eddie, Richie leans down and gives him a brief kiss, a soft expression on his face when he pulls away.

Acting on instinct, Eddie reaches for Richie's arm and wraps it around his shoulder, leaning into the other man's chest, "Republicans. Only Republicans would."

"Heathens, the fucking heathens."

Eddie giggling into Richie's chest, Beverly gestures grandly to the Park entrance. "Well, you non-Republican gentlemen, shall we?"

As they step into the park, Beverly immediately asks Richie if he's free Friday evening, as it's her last night in the city and she wants to see all the Losers before heading back to Chicago. Richie stiffens ever so slightly beside Eddie, but his response is an enthusiastic yes.

When Beverly abandons them a minute or so later, on a quest to find the washroom, Richie turns to Eddie, mouth pressed into a thin line. "So looks like we'll be breaking up soon then, huh?"

Eddie's head whips around. "Huh?"

“Well, Beverly’s leaving on Saturday, right? I thought you said we were gonna break up as soon as she left.”

“Oh, yeah - yeah I did say that. I guess we are then.”

There’s a pause, and Richie’s arm drops off Eddie’s shoulder, hands moving to his pockets. He doesn’t look at Eddie when he speaks. “Have you thought about what you’re gonna say? About why we broke up?”

“Oh, uh. No, not really, actually.” Eddie scratches the back of his neck, uncomfortable. “I’ll probably say some bullshit about how we work better as friends.”

“And then we’ll be like every other couple that says that, and wind up absolutely not being friends anymore.” Richie snorts, unaware that Eddie has come to a complete stop beside him, mouth dropping open.

“You - you don’t think we’ll be friends after this?”

Richie turns to look back at him, confused. “I - Do you even want to be?”

The idea of not talking to Richie on a semi regular basis anymore, or of having him over to watch stupid movies or talk about comics, leaves Eddie’s heart hammering in his chest. He bites his lips, trying to quell his nerves. “Well – yeah, of course I do. Don’t you?”

“Sure Eds, if that’s what you want.” Richie shrugs as he says it, but it seems forced, unnaturally casual.

The insecurity in his voice takes Eddie back to scrolling through his phone the first time Richie had come over, to seeing how often the other man had tried to initiate conversation with him, and how little effort he’d put back in. A pit of guilt settles in his stomach. After all, it’s not Richie’s fault that he had a girlfriend when Eddie first met him, that Eddie had felt like an idiot and never known how to act around him.

Fingernails digging into his palms, Eddie opens his mouth several times before he finds the right words. “I know we weren’t really

friends before, and that it was my fault. And I'm – I'm really, really sorry about that. But it wasn't – it wasn't ever really about you. It was me being an idiot, and getting stuck in my head and overthinking everything." Pausing, he hazards a glance at Richie, who's now watching him curiously. "But I have really liked hanging out with you and I don't – I really don't want to go back to the way things were before."

Richie blinks at him, wide eyed from behind his glasses. The seconds that pass feel like hours to Eddie, and he heaves a huge sigh of relief when Richie finally replies. "I've – I've liked it too Eds."

"Okay. Okay, cool."

"Yeah, cool." says Richie. He runs a through his hair before his eyes land on something in the distance, his face breaking out into a smile. "I think I've found the Losers."

Following his gaze, Eddie immediately spies a large, bright green plaid blanket on the lawn that he recognizes as Ben's. A laugh escapes his mouth when he realizes that Bill, Ben, Stan, and Patty are all dog piled on top of each other, Stan unfortunately stuck on the bottom. Squinting, Eddie can just make out the look of clear displeasure on his face.

"Poor Stan."

"The man probably deserved it, make no mistake."

The park fills up quickly, and soon the Losers are crammed together on the blanket like sardines. They quickly divide into units: Ben and Beverly at the front of the blanket, Stan, Patty, and Richie on one side and Bill and Eddie on the other.

Despite being in separate conversations, Richie and Eddie still wind up sandwiched beside each other, Eddie's leg draped over Richie's thigh, shoulder pressing back into his chest. Just before the movie begins, Bill Facetimes Mike, everyone eagerly piling on top of one another to wave at the screen. Richie's whining when Mike refuses once again to buy him an alligator is cut off when Eddie gives him a loud, generous smooch on the cheek.

“It’s not quite a gator, but it’ll do.” Richie mutters, wrapping his arm around Eddie’s waist and squeezing.

Lying in bed later that night, Eddie finds his mind running on overdrive, completely unwilling to let his exhausted body go to sleep. Spotify’s Deep Sleep playlist is played, sheep are counted, calm beaches with rolling waves are visualized - but no such luck. He tosses and turns, body desperate to find a comfortable position, before giving up in a huff, flopping his face into the pillow and letting out a loud, irritated groan.

He turns his head to the side and stares at the empty pillow beside him, mind whirring back to the previous night, when Richie had been lying in that exact spot. His chest constricts at the image.

He’d jumped out of bed this morning, quietly getting ready for work as Richie snored a few feet away. He wonders what it would have been like if he’d woken Richie up, said goodbye to him before he dashed out the door. Would Richie have even woken up? Or would he just have batted Eddie away, rolling over in bed to get a better sleep?

Unbidden, another scene pops into his head. This time it’s of Richie sitting at the breakfast bar, just in his boxers, as he drags Eddie in by the tie for a goodbye kiss, mouth covered in toast crumbs. Eddie grumbles about greasy fingers on his work clothes, but he smiles into the kiss nonetheless, letting Richie paw at him hungrily. Maybe he’d play hooky from work, just this once...

Dirty thoughts make for dirty boys Eddiebear.

The words cut through the darkness like a blade, and Eddie immediately stiffens up. He tries to remind himself that there is nothing wrong with wanting to wake up next to someone that you care about, that it is a completely normal, human desire, but it doesn’t work. Instead the words *dirty dirty dirty* begin to swirl in his head like a whirlpool, dragging everything down with them.

Eddie presses the heels of his palms into his eyes, trying to push the thoughts away. His breathing starts to become more shallow. And nope, this is not good.

He is here, in his bedroom, in his apartment, with Beverly just on the other side of that door. Everything is okay.

Four seconds in, four seconds out, four seconds in, four seconds out. Focus on the diaphragm.

It takes longer than normal to work, because it's late and Eddie's tired and everything always, always seems to feel scarier at night. By the time Eddie brings his breathing back to normal, his throat is parched, sucked dry from all the heaving.

Eddie's muscles are still tense. As he looks around the bedroom, it feels like the scene of a crime and he's immediately filled with an urge to escape. Scrambling out of bed, he heads over the door and opens it, sneaking through quietly so as not to wake up Beverly.

The sneaking isn't necessary, since Eddie's greeted by the sight of Beverly curled up on the couch in the dark, headphones in and laptop on her knees.

When she sees Eddie coming out of his room, she removes the headphones and squints, confused. "Eds?"

"Just getting some water." he replies, pointing to the kitchen while he pads his way over and grabs a cup from the cupboard. "What are you doing still up?"

"I decided to watch an episode of Schitt's Creek before I went to bed. And that was - " Beverly leans forward, squints at her laptop screen. "Over an hour ago?"

"Rookie mistake."

There's a hum of agreement from the couch as Eddie fills his cup with water, glass slippery under his sweaty palm. Once it's near full, he takes a long, desperate swig. Eddie can hear another voice in his head while the water slips down his throat. It's softer than his mother's, quiet and encouraging, urging him to *tell her, tell her, tell her.*

He sets the cup firmly down on the counter and turns to face Beverly, hands gripping the counter tightly. The light from Beverly's laptop illuminates the curious expression that's now on her face. Eddie

hesitates, then takes a deep breath. “Bev, do you still – do you still hear your dad’s voice sometimes? Like, in your head?”

“Of course.”

Eddie blinks. “Really?”

“Yeah, Eds.” There’s a small, sad smile on her face now. When she speaks, it comes out as a whisper. “Maybe not as often as I used to, but it’s still there sometimes.”

The idea that someone as brave and intelligent as Beverly could still struggle with the past makes Eddie take a step aback. It’s heartbreaking and comforting all at once, an uncomfortable combination of emotions that leaves a twisting feeling in his gut. “So how do you deal with it, then?”

Beverly frowns, thinking. “I just – I just try to remind myself that it’s just one person’s voice. And that that person is gone now, and that I have so many other people in my life now whose voices I can try to listen to instead.” She looks at Eddie with a pointed expression. “Voices that think I am absolutely fine just the way I am.”

A warm feeling spreads through Eddie. His body relaxes ever so slightly, hands loosening their death grip on the counter. “Right. Thanks Bev.”

“Anytime.” As Eddie begins to make his way back to the bedroom, cup now in hand, she opens her mouth again, nervous. “Oh, and Eds?”

“Hm?”

Even in the dark, the flush spreading across Beverly’s cheeks is obvious. “Ben asked me to go for dinner on Thursday. And I said yes.”

*

Unfortunately, Eddie’s sleep deprivation means he’s running on fumes the next day and has to stay late at work, his productivity having been cut in half. It doesn’t improve much by Thursday, Eddie’s phone

constantly being lit up by frantic messages from Ben, nervous about his date with Beverly later that evening.

It also doesn't help that it's the day of Richie's Daily Show audition, which means that Eddie spends every spare moment glancing at the clock, wondering how it's going.

The answer, apparently, is not good.

At least, that's what Richie says when Eddie texts him on the way home from work, disappointment practically dripping through the thinly veiled jokes in his messages. When a concerned Eddie reads them to Beverly, he's met with raised eyebrows and a "So what are you going to do about it?".

Which is how Eddie finds himself asking Richie for his address and knocking on his door one hour later, a large pepperoni pizza in tow.

"Well if it isn't my knight in shining armour." Richie grins.

"Your knight who needs a fucking shower." Eddie grumbles as he stalks through the doorway and passes the pizza to Richie, who takes it with a look of glee. "Remind me why I live in New York again?"

"Because pizza?"

With a snort, Eddie begins to look around Richie's apartment, eyes greedy for every little detail, from the large map of Queens hanging above the couch to the scuff marks all over the hardwood. While Eddie takes it all in, he spies Richie headed towards a room that, assuming from the mess on the floor, can only be his bedroom.

"Is Amy around?" Eddie calls out.

"Nope," says Richie, his voice echoing from the bedroom. "She's out on the town with the old ball and chain, of course."

When Richie doesn't return seconds later, Eddie turns around and, after a moment's hesitation, follows him into the room.

The atmosphere of Richie's bedroom is similar to that of the rest of the apartment. It's a little bit grungy and a little bit cluttered, king of

like the room took a trip down to the thrift shop and stayed there for a bit too long. But it's also distinctly Richie, covered in comic book posters, cigarette butt still smoking in the ash tray on the desk by the window.

Tucked into the corner is a relatively small double bed, upon which Richie is now sitting, cross legged, with the pizza box in front of him.

"You want to eat it on your bed?" Eddie cringes, gently placing his backpack on the floor.

Glancing at Eddie like he's grown two heads, Richie leans over and grabs his laptop from where its perched on the nightstand, setting it beside him on the mattress. "Well, yeah. How else do you eat your pizza?"

"But it's – it's so greasy."

"Pizza is designed to be eaten on the bed, Eds. That's why it's so popular in college."

"I don't think that's –" Eddie's sentence fades out as Richie grabs a slice and takes a large, defiant bite out of it. "Fine, fine, your room your rules." He then hops onto the other side of the bed so that the pizza box sits directly between the two of them, Richie's lips already shiny from the pizza grease. "So, what happened at the audition, then?"

A half hearted shrug. "I just – I dunno, just got into my own head, I guess."

"Oh?"

Richie sighs, scrubs a hand through his hair. "Auditions are hard. They – the producers aren't supposed to give anything away, so they don't laugh at your jokes. It makes it all really uncomfortable." He looks up at Eddie, who's reaching for his own slice of pizza, grease be damned. "Not to mention that after the audition, I walked out of the room and there was this other dude there and he was holding all these props. And, like, clearly that's the thing they're looking for. Someone who's gonna go the extra mile, loop other things in."

Eddie pauses, pizza slice an inch from his mouth, and frowns. “Or maybe they’re looking for someone who doesn’t need props to be funny?”

“Well that wasn’t me either.” Richie waves his hand dismissively before grunting. “Sorry, I - I shouldn’t be a bumner. It was nice of you to come over.”

“It’s fine. I didn’t come over here expecting you to have like, rainbows and sunshine coming out of your ass.”

“No. But I bet you were thinking about my ass a little bit.”

Eddie feels his face warm. “Fuck off Trashmouth.”

If Richie notices him blushing, he doesn’t say anything, instead pulling up a video on Youtube that he insists Eddie has to watch. Youtube being Youtube, one video turns into another, and soon enough the pizza box is empty, Eddie dragging Richie to the kitchen to wash their now grease covered hands. When they return to the bedroom, Richie immediately jumps back on the bed and starts up a David Bowie playlist while Eddie watches from the doorway, hesitating.

“I uh – brought something else for you, too.” Richie’s head whips up from his laptop, eyes wide. “No, no – not like, not like anything *weird*. I just – ugh, here.” He stalks over to his backpack and pulls out a comic book, which he then passes over to Richie, fingers leaving smudge marks on its plastic case.

As Richie takes it in his hand, his mouth drops open. “Holy shit. Is this –“

“Wolverine 1? Yup.”

“Holy – holy shit.” He gestures to the case while Eddie sits himself back down on the bed, pizza box no longer between them. “Is it okay if I -?”

“Yeah, of course. That’s why I brought it over - thought you might like to check it out, since he’s, you know, your favourite for some reason.”

Richie doesn't acknowledge Eddie's attempt at a jab. Instead, in a manner that can only be described as delicate, he slides the comic out of its case and takes it in his hands, flipping reverently through the pages. "How did you get this? Doesn't this go for like, fucking thousands?"

"It was my dad's."

Richie freezes immediately at the words. When he looks up from the comic, his face is drenched in disbelief, as if Eddie's just announced that the Phantom Menace is actually his favourite Star Wars film.

Feeling awkward under the weight of Richie's stare, Eddie continues. "He used to collect them, when he was a kid. My mom held onto them for some reason, and then I got them after she died." A beat. "What - what about you? You said you had comics, right?"

Richie shakes his head, apparently awoken out of his fugue state. "I, uh, yeah - yeah I do. You wanna see 'em?" When Eddie nods, he carefully sets the Wolverine comic to the side and, rolling off the bed, walks over to his bookshelf. "I gotta warn you though, they're all crinkled to shit."

A minute or so later, Eddie's joined on the bed by a dozen or so comics which are, indeed, crinkled to shit. Richie gestures to the pile lazily as he settles back down on the mattress. "Have at 'er Eds. I've read them all, like, a thousand times."

Eddie dives for them greedily. "So which one's your favourite, then?"

"Uh, my favourite's not there, actually. I sold it a little over a year ago."

"Oh. What was it?"

"The Nabisco Wolverine."

Eddie's mouth drops open. "What! Seriously?"

The Nabisco Wolverine had been Eddie's white fucking whale as a child, a limited edition release that one could only get by mailing in an obscene amount of Nabisco snack barcodes. Of course, Eddie's

mom being Eddie's mom, he'd never been able to get his hands on near enough snacks to get the comic.

"Yup. Pretty sure it was me and my dad that kept Nabisco in business back in the 90s."

Eddie wrinkles his nose, "Wait, isn't your dad a dentist?"

"Yup. But Went the Dent has always been willing to sacrifice for the greater good."

"You lucky fuck. So why'd you sell it then?"

Richie fiddles with his shirt, awkward. "I went into a bit of debt when Sandra and I were dating. We went to a few like, big industry events or whatever, because she wanted to make, you know, connections and all that. But they were real expensive, so I wound up missing a few rent payments."

"Shit."

"It was fucking stupid too, since Sandra and I usually just wound up fighting after them."

"Oh?"

"Well I'd get super goddamn bored and start making stupid jokes to keep myself entertained - not exactly plus one material. The ridiculous socks and Goodwill shirts probably didn't help either." Richie grimaces. He grabs one of his comics and rolls it up, knocking it gently against Eddie's knee. "Oh well, you live and you learn, right Eds?"

"So they fucking tell me." Eddie snorts before he and Richie both reach for the comics in front of them, a silent agreement that it's time to get reading.

They soon rearrange themselves, Richie strewn obnoxiously at the head of the bed while Eddie sits at its foot, back pressed against the wall, their legs tangled together at the bottom of the mattress. David Bowie continues to play softly in the background.

But then Richie yawns. And it shouldn't be distracting to Eddie, but it is. In fact, it's incredibly distracting, the way his arms lift into the air to stretch, veins smoothly roping down pale skin from elbow to his wrist. The shirt he's wearing rides up to reveal tensed stomach muscles. Eddie gulps, loudly.

He tries to refocus on his comic, but it's like a dam has been broken in his mind, like he's suddenly hyper aware of every little thing Richie is doing –how he rubs the back of his neck every few minutes, or is constantly pushing his glasses up his nose, which are always on the verge of falling off.

Eventually, Eddie jumps up from the bed and, claiming in a rather strained voice that he has to take a leak, rushes to the bathroom and splashes his face several times over with cold water. When he comes back to the bedroom, he finds Richie hunched over his desk, clumsily rolling a joint.

“Do you mind?” Richie asks. “I can – I can smoke out on the fire escape, if you like.”

“No, no, it's fine. Like I said, your place your rules.”

Eddie watches Richie prop himself on the window and stick the joint between his lips, pulling a lighter out of his pockets. He takes a long, slow drag, smoke curling out the now open window as he leans his head back at the window sill and glances at Eddie from behind half lidded eyes.

“Actually, can I have some?” Eddie squeaks.

Richie shrugs, passing the joint over to Eddie as he joins him against the window. “Sure thing, Eds.”

Soon enough, the two return to Richie's bed, now talking nonsense about parallel universes, and life on Mars, and whether or not Ben might actually be a serial killer.

As Eddie sits next to Richie, their sides pressed together, he feels completely at ease - boneless and lazy, like the world outside doesn't exist anymore. He knows he should be getting home, that it's getting

late and he needs to get ready for tomorrow. But it all seems so far away. It's as if the Eddie who works as a risk analyst on Wall Street is part of an alternate universe, a cheap imitation of the one who's lying here right now.

When the conversation drifts back to what the best planet is, Eddie winds up sending out a message to the Loser's group chat, asking them for their opinion. It doesn't go well, given that Bill, Stan, and Ben all wind up preferring different planets.

"Who the fuck likes Mars?" Richie sneers when Bill contributes his opinion.

"He probably just had a crush on Sailor Mars as a kid."

"Well, didn't we all?"

"Not me." says Eddie. "I was always more of a Matt from Digimon person."

Richie's eyes widen in recognition. "Oh yeah! Phew, I bet that harmonica and sleeveless green turtleneck drove little Eddie Kaspbrak wild."

"You have no idea, man. I bought a harmonica because of him, used to play it on my way home from school."

"Shit! No way. You fucking loser." When Eddie goes to swat at him, Richie holds up his hands defensively. "Just kidding Eds. It's not like I was exactly the epitome of cool as a child."

Eddie gasps, "You? No!"

"It's hard to believe, I know." Richie sighs, "I used to walk around in Hawaiian shirts, talking in a stupid ass voices all day, thinking I was the funniest cat in town. They were dark times."

"I mean, is that any different to what you're like now?"

As a snickering Eddie ducks to avoid Richie's half hearted swipe to his head, he sees his phone light up with a new message in the group chat. It's from Mike.

Jupiter, since observing the rotation of Jupiter's moons is what led Galileo to propose that the Earth revolves around the sun.

Which revolutionized both how we see the universe, and our place within it.

Can your planets say that?

"Christ, Hanlon coming in for the kill." Eddie shows the phone to Richie, who's watching him pensively, teeth gnawing at his bottom lip. When Richie sees the message, he lets out a loud snort.

"I think he wins."

"Fucking librarians."

As Eddie sends out this exact sentiment in the group chat, Richie turns to stare at his hands, fingers playing with the duvet. When he speaks, it sounds doubtful. "Do you think we'd have been friends as kids?"

"Hm?"

"If we met as kids" Richie repeats, voice louder. "Do you think we would have wound up being friends."

Eddie shrugs, sets his phone back on the night table. "Would you have even wanted to be friends with me? I mean, I wore a fanny pack every fucking day. And played a harmonica."

"Eds, I was friends with Stan. Clearly my standards were not that high. The man went bird watching every weekend, for god's sake!" Richie throws his hands in the air dramatically. "Plus I bet you were goddamn adorable in that fanny pack."

Memories of walking home everyday as fast as he could while having to constantly look over his shoulder, breaths shallow and anxious, flash through Eddie's mind. "I don't think Henry Bowers would have agreed with you."

“Local bully?” A nod. “Ah, yes. I know them well.” Richie scratches the back of this neck. Then he glances over at Eddie and elbows him softly in the ribs, eyes twinkling. “Man, can’t you just see us - hiding out from the bullies together, comrades in arms?”

“Maybe. I mean, if you talked as much then as you do now, I might have given you up as a sacrifice.”

Richie sniffs haughtily. “Lies and slander.”

“I guess we’ll never know.” Eddie replies. And then. “But it might have been nice to have a friend who reads comics. I mean, Bev is the best, but –“

“She didn’t have the Nabisco Wolverine to share with you?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

Richie rolls onto his side and grabs Eddie’s shoulder with one hand, gesturing enthusiastically with the other. “Just picture me, Eds. Rolling into your house, Oreos smeared all over my face, shoving that comic in your face. I don’t know if you’d be disgusted or overjoyed.”

Eddie lets out a loud scoff. “Yeah fucking right, there’s no way in hell my mom would have let you into our place.”

“C’mon. I’ve always been a total charmer with the parents, your Mrs. K wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“Nope, not my mom. She would have absolutely hated you.” When Richie just blinks at him from behind his glasses, shocked, Eddie hastily continues. “Don’t take it personally though, she hated everyone I hung out with.”

Richie’s eyebrows draw together. “What. Why?”

And that is a very, very loaded question – one that has taken a lot of self reflection and therapy to even approach. As a kid, it had been confusing. Eddie had always been convinced that his mother was just trying to protect him, that her fears and neuroses were born out of love, a desire to give him a healthy life after his dad’s premature death.

But as time went on, the door to outside was locked more often, and the medications became more frequent. And it started to feel a lot less about protecting Eddie, and a lot more about controlling him. It's heavy, and frustrating, and also something that Eddie doesn't want to dive in too deeply with Richie, not right now.

Except he always doesn't want to lie to him.

So instead he just glances at him and grimaces, "Because if I was hanging out with them, then I wasn't with her. And she really, really didn't like that."

"Well that sounds a bit fucked."

"Yeah, it really was." Eddie says.

Richie's playlist comes to an abrupt end, and the entire room screams in silence.

Thankfully, Richie doesn't push Eddie any further. Instead he hops off the bed and dashes over to his desk, where his laptop had earlier been abandoned.

As Eddie watches Richie scroll through Spotify, an ache begins to spread through in his body, starting at his stomach and moving up into his throat. Richie Tozier as a kid – it's easy to picture. He was probably much like he is now, all gangly limbs and ridiculous jokes, with his glasses maybe taking up half of his face instead of the usual third.

He can't help but wonder what life might have been like if they had met earlier. It might have been more like an actual childhood - one with milk being snorted out of noses and fights over comic books, of racing on second hand bicycles and telling stupid ghost stories in the dark.

Maybe it wouldn't have been like that. Maybe if Richie had grown up in Derry, he and Eddie would have barely crossed paths, been nothing more than classmates, acquaintances. But for some reason, Eddie really, really doubts that.

When Richie returns to the bed, he sits down beside Eddie, their

shoulders brushing. An acoustic guitar begins to play from the laptop as Richie takes out his phone and begins to scroll. Eddie swallows thickly.

“I wish I had known you back then.” Out of the corner of his eye, Eddie sees Richie turn towards him, surprised. “I think – I think I would have been a lot happier if you’d been around.”

A smile flickers across Richie’s face. “So you wouldn’t have sacrificed me, Eds?” He asks, his voice soft.

“No - I mean, you might have driven me a bit crazy.” Richie’s chuckle is cut off as Eddie turns to look at him, their faces now mere inches apart. “But I think it would have been in a good way.”

In another moment, Eddie might have cringed at how achingly earnest his words sound. But he doesn’t now, not with the way which Richie’s looking at him, lips parted. The air between them feels heavy. If the music is still playing in the background, Eddie can’t tell, heartbeat pounding too loudly in his ears.

His gaze flits down to Richie’s lips, chapped as always, before drawing back up to his eyes. That’s when Richie gulps and gives an almost imperceptible nod.

It’s all the permission Eddie needs. He surges forward and crashes their lips together, fingers tangling up in Richie’s hair while Richie places his hand on Eddie’s waist, drawing him closer. The kiss leaves Eddie breathless. He breaks it off, gasping, before diving back for more, Richie’s tongue swiping into his mouth.

This time there’s no Beverly to interrupt them, no plans later with the Losers. He’s drawing sounds out of Richie that he didn’t even know existed, nipping at his bottom lip while his fingers tighten their hold in his hair, tugging slightly. It’s exhilarating to know that he can make someone feel that way, make *Richie* feel that way.

The thrill is briefly interrupted when Richie goes to roll them over, glasses sliding off his face as he presses Eddie into the mattress. They land with a clack on Eddie’s forehead and Richie lets out a quiet yelp. Hastily discarding them on the nightstand, he turns to Eddie with a

look of embarrassment, a look which soon disintegrates as Eddie giggles and wraps his hands around Richie's neck, dragging him back down for bruising kiss.

And soon enough both their shirts come off, abandoned in a pile beside the bed as Richie peppers kisses along Eddie's jaw. At the feeling of stubble scraping against his skin, Eddie instinctively arches against Richie's body, hips searching for friction. His body is acting on auto pilot, wanting more more more.

He tries to remember how to breathe when Richie's lips move to his chest and begin to slowly make their way down. At Eddie's belt buckle, Richie pauses and looks up, thumbs drawing soft circles on his hips.

"Is this okay?" He asks, voice hoarse, as his right hand moves to hover over the buckle, waiting for permission. His eyes are blown wide, dripping with want, hair a tangled mess thanks to Eddie's enthusiasm.

And *holy shit*, this is an image that Eddie's going to keep in his back pocket forever. "Oh my god, so okay." He gasps.

There's a clink of metal as Eddie's hands desperately grasp at the duvet, and then the world is melting away around him.

Notes for the Chapter:

The moment when UST becomes... RST? Well, fade to black RST, because my smut writing skills are exactly nada.

By the way:

- Consensual, stoned sex can be very, very fun
- In case you couldn't tell by the word washroom, or the Schitt's Creek reference, I am very much Canadian. But I do have a friend who lives in NYC so I have been there several times!
- Richie and Bev were 100% singing along to Tubthumping by Chumbawhumba and You Get What You Give by the New Radicals

- The whole props at an audition was absolutely stolen from a Bill Hader interview where he talked about seeing Andy Samberg when they were both auditioning for SNL and Andy had a million props while Bill had exactly zero

Your comments give me life! I can't explain how lovely it is to read them. Especially those of you who comment after every chapter. I don't know what I've done to deserve y'all, but I'LL TAKE IT!

7. Chapter 7

Eddie's woken up to the sound of his phone ringing.

With a groan, he throws his hand out to the left, reaching for where his phone always sits on the nightstand. Eyes still screwed shut, he barely has time to process that his nightstand feels more cluttered than normal when his fingers land on the phone.

"Hello?" He mumbles, voice hoarse and half muffled by the pillow pressing into his face.

"Hey. Did I wake up?" The voice is vaguely familiar. It belongs to a woman, soft and watery, like the speaker's holding back tears. Eddie just grunts in response, brain sluggish. "Yeah, I figured. Sorry Tozie, you've just – you've been pretty damn hard to reach recently."

At Tozie, Eddie's eyes fly open. The view that greets him is definitely not his bedroom. The sunlight is filtering through a pair of cheap blinds, and his gaze immediately lands on the pile of comic books stacked beside the bed, fingers tightening their grip around the phone as memories of last night come flooding in.

With a gulp, he slowly begins to turn around, the pale, boxer clad body of Richie Tozier soon coming into view. He's snoring into the pillow, hair a tangled mess.

As Eddie's eyes trail up and down Richie's body, alarm bells going haywire in his head, the voice continues speaking, now more hesitant than before. "Tozie? Tozie, are you there?"

Winching, Eddie removes the phone from his ear and holds it out in front of him. He's not surprised to see the name Sandra written across the top of the screen, because of course he'd recognized the voice from somewhere. He opens his mouth several times, trying to figure out what to say, before there's a sigh on the other end of the line and the call is ended.

As the phone returns to Richie's home screen, Eddie's eyes flick up to look at the clock, his heartbeat coming to a shuddering halt when he

sees 8:00 – as in, the time he normally arrives by at the office.

Muttering a few colourful words under his breath, he quietly scrambles out of the bed. Eddie grabs his actual phone, and sees a concerned text from Beverly from last night, asking him where he is. He sends a quick, apologetic reply and scans the room for his clothes. Even in the chaos, it doesn't take long to find them, and Eddie is soon hurriedly pulling on his pants, Richie's blissful snores still echoing in the background. He reaches for his shirt and begins to pull it on, fingers pausing at the sight of a large, red mark above his left hip bone.

A flush rises up Eddie's body as he flashes back to the moment when Richie had left that mark, when Eddie had been arching up into him, fingers tangling in his hair. It had felt good, so, so good. And all the while, Richie's ex-girlfriend had been trying to get a hold of him, probably looking to get back together.

And why wouldn't they get back together, at least at some point? It's probably inevitable. It's hard to compete with four fucking years of history.

There's a part of Eddie that knows he's being ridiculous. From what Richie's said, it's pretty clear that things weren't great with Sandra, and he's shown exactly zero interest in getting back together. But even still, Eddie can't help but compare himself to Sandra in his head, a damning match up to say the least. After all, he's an average height risk analyst that Richie's only spending time with because he's getting paid.

A pit settles in Eddie's stomach and he quickly buttons up the shirt, mark effectively hidden away.

When he reaches for his backpack, Richie rolls onto his side, one eye opening blearily.

"Eds?" He croaks, still half asleep.

"Hey. I'm just – I'm just heading to work. I uh, didn't set an alarm and now I'm super fucking late so." Eddie babbles, ignoring the way Richie's expression is slowly morphing into one of confusion, his

hand reaching for the glasses on the nightstand. “I – you got a call, earlier, and I answered it by mistake. You should um, probably call her back soon. She sounded – she sounded pretty upset.”

Richie unmistakably stiffens, wary eyes now magnified by the lenses of his glasses. Sweat pools in Eddie’s palms.

“Oh, okay.” Richie says softly. There’s a pause while he readjusts his glasses, swallowing. “Did you want some coffee or - ?”

His words are interrupted by a loud ping from the nightstand, phone lighting up with a notification. Eddie’s stomach twists at the knowledge that it’s probably Sandra again, checking to see if Richie can call her, if they can *talk*.

While Richie glances over at his phone, Eddie reaches for the doorknob, palms slippery, and opens the door “Sorry, I – I really do have to go.” He says, voice cracking.

Richie looks up at him, eyebrows furrowed, and opens his mouth to say something, but Eddie cuts him off, stepping through the door with a hastily muttered “See you later.”

Within minutes, Eddie’s heading to the nearest subway station, mouth dry. When he has to stop at a crosswalk, he runs his tongue along his teeth and cringes at the realization that they haven’t been brushed since yesterday morning.

Involuntarily, he’s taken back to the many times his mother would stop him at the front door, returning from an afternoon spent with friends. Memories of her forcing him to open his mouth, to let her smell his breath so that she could make sure he hadn’t been drinking, or smoking.

Eddie wonders how she would react now, his breath probably reeking of good old fashioned dick.

And that’s when Eddie promptly vomits into the nearest trash can.

*

During his first year at the firm, Eddie had spent more than his fair

share of nights in the office, getting less than two hours of sleep as he painstakingly finished report after report, eager to prove his worth. As a result of these less than ideal boundaries, he'd taken to keeping an extra set of clothes, toothbrush, and deodorant in his office.

Today, Eddie's never been more grateful for his "emergency toolkit". He arrives at work over an hour late, clothing crumpled and sweat dripping down his back while he frantically chews a piece of spearmint gum. Several of his co-workers track him with raised eyebrows as he stalks past their desks on the way to his office. He feels oddly on display, as if the words "I got stoned and sucked a dick last night" are written across his forehead.

When he finally reaches his office door, Eddie can faintly hear his name being called in the background. Instead of replying, he opens the door and quickly locks it behind him, leaning with relief against the cool wood. He squeezes his eyes closed and lets out a shaky exhale.

Around ten minutes later, Eddie's dressed in work appropriate clothing, his teeth brushed and deodorant applied. With a grimace, he goes to sit down at his desk, computer already dinging with new emails.

It takes thirty seconds for Jeremy to poke his head in the door.

"Edward, my man." He says, striding into the room and plopping down on Eddie's desk with the confidence of someone who really, truly does not know any better. "Did I just see you do a walk of shame?"

Eddie just quirks an eyebrow in response.

Taking this as confirmation, Jeremy uses one converse clad shoe to give Eddie's shoulder a celebratory nudge. "You fucking dog, you." Oblivious to his supervisor's horrified expression, Jeremy continues, a nostalgic smile on his face. "You know, I had my fair share of those back when I was in the frat. Fuck, sometimes I'd have two in one morning. Those were the days, huh?"

Gritting his teeth, Eddie opens up one of his desk drawers, pretends

to dig through it meticulously. “You know, Jeremy, I think –“

“I swear, this one time, I didn’t have a chance to brush my teeth and the whole fucking day I went around with my breath smelling like p-“

The drawer is closed with a loud, aggressive slam, making Jeremy startle. Eddie tries not to appear smug as he looks up at him. “I need a coffee. You think you could you grab me a coffee?”

“Sure thing, boss man. A dog’s got to caffeinate, right?” Jeremy winks, pushing off the desk.

As the door closes behind Jeremy, Eddie covers his face with his hands and lets out a loud, irritated groan.

From then on, he checks his phone every five minutes, chugging the coffee that Jeremy drops off. He tries not to be disappointed when he sees nothing from Richie.

At lunch time, Eddie calls Beverly and gets the scoop on her date with Ben, the affectionate edge to her voice betraying her when she says that it went “fine”. Eddie teases her for a generous five minutes before they make final arrangements for her last night in town. It’s settled that all the Losers will meet at the bar that’s just around the corner from Eddie’s apartment, a wildly popular watering hole that has both edible food, vintage arcade games, and a beer garden.

Before ending the call, Eddie apologizes again for not coming home the previous night. Beverly just brushes him off with a laugh, “C’mon Kaspbrak, like I’m ever going to be mad about you getting laid.”

He sends the plan out to the group chat as soon as Beverly hangs up, about to meet with a professor from NYU. Unfortunately, Richie’s still not been added to the chat, so Eddie has to send him the message individually. His fingers hover over Richie’s name in his contact list before he grits his teeth and sends a brief message with the name of the bar and a **See you there at 9?**

Eddie practically jumps out of his seat when his phone vibrates an hour later with Richie’s reply.

Sure thing Spaghetti.

A shiver runs through his spine as Eddie reads Spaghetti, which Richie hasn't used since the great macaroni. It would seem that, despite having won the bet, Richie had taken Eddie's complaints about the nickname to heart, having switched over to Eds ever since.

And Eds is *definitely* what Richie had been calling Eddie last night, since the deep, throaty way he'd been saying the name has been permanently etched in Eddie's head.

Except now Richie's calling him Spaghetti again, like they're back to being mere acquaintances, friends of friends who have a tendency to push each other's buttons. It's an awful, torturous idea, and Eddie hates it.

But maybe he'll just have to get used to it. After all, Richie's probably talked to Sandra by now, heard her soft, tear stained voice. He's probably realized how much he's actually missed her, now having Eddie's dull company and sloppy, inexperienced blow jobs for comparison. Maybe they've even discussed getting back together.

And since Eddie's a sucker for punishment, he decides to do what any insecure person would do in his place: he stalks Sandra's Instagram account.

It's a poor decision.

Sandra has thousands of followers on Instagram, and her feed is a coveted collection of artistic travel photos and headshots, all showcasing her long, slender body and perfect smile. The top post is a picture of her standing in front of the Brooklyn Bridge, dated two days ago. As Eddie scrolls further down, he comes across a picture of her and Richie from back when they were together.

Richie has his arm wrapped around her, pulling her in at the waist as she kisses him on the cheek. He must be wearing his contacts, since there's no glasses on his face, and Eddie's shocked at how different he looks without them. His style, however, remains recognizable as ever, gaudy patterned button up serving as a direct contrast to Sandra's sleek, black cocktail dress.

Underneath the photo, the caption reads: *I love him more than pizza, and that's saying a lot.*

They look perfect together.

As Eddie glances through the comments, which are primarily hearts or a variation of the word cute, he can't help but wonder why Richie would hook up with him, when he could get someone like Sandra.

Because you're buying him Streetfighter, his mind traitorously supplies.

And no, no, no. Eddie shakes the thought away, certain that Richie would not have fooled around with him if he didn't want to. After all, Eddie waited until Richie nodded, and he'd wound up being a very fucking eager participant in it all, pushing the hook up further than Eddie ever would have on his own. Plus there's the way he's been looking at Eddie, a weird mix of desperation and affection that has always felt so utterly genuine.

But still, maybe Eddie's just been seeing what he wants to see. After all, it's not like Eddie has much experience in the dating department, let alone hook ups. For all he knows, it could have just been a matter of proximity, a 'we're already pretending to date so we might as well get each other off' situation.

It feels like there's just been a car crash in Eddie's body. Pulse racing, he closes Instagram, slams the phone on the desk, and goes to get yet another coffee.

*

Eddie winds up having to stay several hours late at the office, which means by the time he gets back to Harlem, Beverly's already left for the bar, having gone to snag a table with Ben.

The first thing he does is shower, impatient to wash away the sticky, tacky feeling on his skin, still lingering from the previous night's activities. He takes the soap and scrubs his body down militantly, leaving it lobster pink and stinging as he steps out of the shower.

Eddie arrives at the bar twenty minutes later and immediately makes his way to the beer garden, a sprawling collection of picnic tables

where New Yorkers can drink beer, eat smoked sausages, and play cards under the evening sun. Unsurprisingly, the garden is packed, and Eddie squints his eyes, searching for the Losers among the crowd.

It doesn't take him long. Beverly's hair calls out like a beacon as she talks enthusiastically to someone beside her, beer in hand. Eddie stands up on his tip toes and tries to see if Richie's at the table with her.

It turns out to be unnecessary, because a second later Eddie feels someone walk up next to him, elbow brushing against his arm.

"And Eduardo makes his appearance." says a familiar voice.

He turns to see Richie beside him, gigantic tray of beers in hand. His arms are flexed slightly as a result, pale against the colours of his Hawaiian shirt, and there's a brief moment where Eddie thinks back to those arms flipping him over in bed last night, pinning him against the mattress. He swallows thickly, heat rising to his face, before looking up at Richie, who watches him with a smirk that doesn't quite reach the eyes.

Eddie gestures lamely to the tray. "You on the beer run?"

"Yup, sure am."

There's an awkward pause and Eddie hesitates. "Sorry about this morning, Rich. I didn't – I didn't mean to be a dick, I was just super fucking late for work, and I hate being late."

"No worries man."

"Really?" Eddie frowns.

"Yeah, yeah. Hakuna matata, or whatever, right?" Richie shrugs, and Eddie narrows his eyes, because it certainly doesn't sound hakuna matata. But Richie avoids his gaze, nodding over to where the Losers are sitting. "Well, shall we?"

It's obvious that Richie doesn't really want to talk, so Eddie doesn't say anything, following him carefully through the crowd until they reach the Losers, all of whom have already arrived except for Mike. A wave of cheers greet them as they approach the table, greedy hands

reaching for the beers before Richie's even set down the tray.

The Losers have left a gap big enough for Richie and Eddie to sit beside each other, seeing as they're a couple, and Eddie silently curses their thoughtfulness. But for better or for worse, Richie's a good actor, and so any tension between them seemingly melts away as they sit down. Richie wraps his arm around Eddie and tugs him close.

It feels a little stiffer than normal, a little less natural, but Eddie takes it, acutely aware of how much his body has come to crave Richie's touch. He instantly relaxes at the sound of Richie laughing in his ear as Bill tells some embarrassing story.

When Mike arrives some time later, fresh from his trip to Florida, he gives Beverly a one armed hug before tossing a small, stuffed alligator across the table at Richie. It's about six inches in size and wearing a bright orange t-shirt.

"My hero!" Richie swoons.

Mike takes a seat beside Bill. "His name is Albert, apparently."

At that, Richie shakes his head. "No way, he's in New York now. New city means new identity." Setting the alligator in the middle of the table, he looks around the table, eyebrows raised. "I'm thinking Stan. Thoughts?"

"Fuck off Richie."

"C'mon Stanny! It's a compliment. They're very tough and imposing creatures."

Eddie snickers behind his hand, earning a grin from Richie and a glare from Stan. Soon enough, each Loser is throwing random names out into the air, Richie rejects each and every one. He's dismissing Chomp as too conventional when an idea comes to Eddie.

"What about Curtis?" He interrupts, table falling silent.

"Like, from the Outsiders?" asks Ben. He holds up his hands defensively when everyone stares at him. "What? I liked that book!"

Laughing, Beverly affectionately nudges her shoulder against Ben's, a full flush breaking out over his face. "Stay gold, Hanscom, stay gold."

"No, not the Outsiders. Curtis for Dr. Dr. Curtis Connors."

Bill wrinkles his nose. "Wh-who's that?"

"He's the Lizard, from Spiderman." Richie says softly. There's a small, nostalgic smile on his face when he glances over at Eddie and nods in approval. "I like it."

"Technically alligators aren't actually lizards, they're more closely related to birds." Mike points out, tone warm.

"Mike, don't ruin this with your encyclopaedic knowledge." Richie wags his finger. "Now does anyone have a pen?" When Beverly grabs one out of her bag, because an academic is always prepared, he taps it gently on each of the alligator's shoulders, expression deadly serious. "I dub thee Ser Curtis the Gator, protector of New York."

Once he's done speaking, Mike bows his head in mock reverence, grin tugging at his lips. All the other Losers quickly follow suit and Beverly even stands up from the table to delicately curtsy.

As the evening wears on, the Losers begin to rotate spots, an unintentional game of musical chairs where everyone wants to sit beside everyone else. A belligerent game of Bullshit is played, with Curtis being used to decide the winner, and an obscene amount of smoked sausages are purchased.

At some point, Ben and Beverly wind up huddled at one corner of the table, foreheads pressed together, while Bill and Eddie ask Mike increasingly random questions about Florida. Across from them, Eddie can vaguely hear Stan talking to Richie about the latest bird watching expedition he went on with Patty. Mike's mid sinkhole story when Richie stands up from the table with a loud, over dramatic groan.

"Why don't we take this conversation over to Streetfighter, Staniel? Lord fucking knows I'll do anything for Streetfighter."

The comment punches Eddie in the gut, but Richie doesn't seem to notice, laughing as Stan stands up and quirks an eyebrow.

"Loser pays the winner's beer tab?" Stan asks, holding out his hand.

"Deal."

After they shake on it, Richie looks over at Eddie, grin on his face devolving into a look of confusion when he sees the colour having drained from his face. But just as Richie opens his mouth to say something, Stan grabs him by the shoulders and shoves him gently towards the bar. Eddie watches as Richie throws him a brief, thoughtful look over his shoulder.

Eddie has no idea to interpret it. He has no idea how to interpret anything.

As Bill and Mike continue to talk beside him, Eddie can feel himself slowly being drawn back into the paranoia he had at the office, that insistent feeling that Richie only hooked up with him because of the deal. After all, why else would he have fucking touched him?

A slimy, swarmy feeling starts to crawl up his spine, his mother's voice whispering soothingly into his ear.

You need to be careful Eddiebear.

Within seconds, Eddie's fingers are digging into his palms, nails pressing hard enough to leave a mark. His heart begins to pound in his ears, unrelenting.

There's the sudden feeling of a hand on his shoulder and Eddie jumps, alarmed. He looks up to see Bill watching him, his face creased in worry.

"You o-o-okay there, Eddie?"

"I – yeah, sorry, I'm fine." Eddie blinks, looking between Bill and Mike, both watching him closely. "Just – just had a long day at work, is all."

Bill looks sceptical. "Y-you sure?"

“Scout’s honour.”

Thankfully, Bill doesn’t push it. He gives Eddie a small, encouraging nod before turning back to his conversation with Mike.

His body feeling like it’s on fire, Eddie reaches for his cup and chugs back the final sip of beer, grateful for the cold liquid. As he sets the cup back down, Eddie tries to think about his breathing, to go back to the technique he’s always used.

But the beer garden is too loud. People jostle behind him as they walk between tables, laughing and shrieking. With no chance to calm his breathing, Eddie can feel himself getting more anxious, his mother’s voice slowly worming its way back into his head.

And you know what happens to dirty boys, Eddiebear? Bad things.

Acutely aware of Bill right beside him, glancing over every so often just to check in, Eddie takes his phone out of his pocket and begins to scroll aimlessly, desperate to show that he’s not losing his mind. As the pictures fly past, he doesn’t even register them and at one point he rubs his neck, cringing at how wet his hand is when he pulls it away.

Nobody likes a dirty boy, Eddiebear.

Overwhelming shame rushes through him like a cyclone, whirring and whirring with alarming ferocity, destruction being left in its wake. He vaguely registers Bev and Ben abandoning the table, holding hands, and Stan returning from Streetfighter, a smug expression on his face.

Richie’s name comes up, something about picking up the tab, but Eddie can’t process it. There’s an unpleasant taste in his mouth, and blaring sounds are coming at him from all angles, both from outside and inside his head. It’s impossible to think clearly.

That’s when Eddie realizes he really, really needs to go somewhere quiet.

And soon enough, he’s scrambling off his seat, eyes fixed on the bar, desperate to find a washroom where he can splash some water on his

face.

“I’m – I’ll be right back.” He squeaks, avoiding Bill’s concerned look.

By the time Eddie gets inside the bar, he’s managed to slightly calm himself down, the promise of an escape route and the cool splash of water always enough to prevent a crisis. Unfortunately, the bar’s not much better than inside. In fact, it’s arguably worse – what with the dark lighting and loud music, arcade games flashing in the background.

Eddie feels his body relax as a sign for the washroom comes into view. He begins to head that way, a man on a mission.

That’s when he hears her.

“I just really miss you, okay? It doesn’t feel right without you.”

Eddie freezes in place. Looking in the direction of the voice, he immediately spots Sandra in the corner by the washroom, tears streaming down her face. Despite only being able to see his back, it’s clearly Richie standing in front of her.

Because of course, of course this is what happens when the Losers go to cool bars – cool people are there, cool people who used to live in Harlem, and who probably used to come to this bar every goddamn weekend.

Richie mutters something, puts his hand on Sandra’s shoulder, and Eddie wishes the ground would swallow him whole. Sandra looks beautiful even when she’s crying, whereas Eddie so much as sheds one tear looks like he’s come down with pink eye.

A few seconds pass, and Richie shifts his weight, arm dropping back to his side. That’s when Eddie realizes he must be staring, because Sandra looks up at him, her eyes widening in recognition. When Richie turns around, his mouth drops open.

“Eds.” He begins to say, but Eddie cuts him off hastily.

“I’m just gonna...” The sentence fades out as Eddie looks around. The washroom is *right there*, but going in would mean having to walk past

Richie and Sandra again on his way out, and Eddie would sooner nap in a public toilet stall than let that happen. His eyes flick over to the exit sign above a nearby door, clearly leading to an alley. "... gonna go outside."

He clumsily stumbles towards the exit, shoving the door open with the ferocity of someone in the depths of fight or flight mode. The air that greets him has the familiar stench of any Manhattan alleyway, but Eddie barely notices, immediately leaning up against the wall and pressing his hands against his eyes, head buzzing.

The alley is thankfully quiet. The distant rumbling of cars and shouting New Yorkers are soothing in comparison to the bar, and Eddie immediately dives into his breathing routine, frantically trying to get rid of the uncomfortable sensations in his body.

Four seconds in, four seconds out, four seconds in, four seconds out. Focus on the diaphragm.

He's on the second cycle of breathing when the door beside him opens.

"Hey." says Richie, moving so that the two of them are within inches of each other. He nudges his arm up against Eddie's shoulder and chuckles awkwardly. "Sorry you had to see that. You alright?"

Eddie glances down, hopeful that Richie won't hear how fast his heart is beating, or see the sweat beading at the top of his forehead. "I – yeah, yeah. You?"

"As alright as you can be when you run into a crying ex at the bar."

"Right." Eddie grimaces. "It definitely didn't look alright."

"Nope, sure wasn't. Guess the LA thing hasn't really been working out."

"So what, she gonna move back to New York or something?" A nod. "And lemme guess, she wants to get back together?" Eddie asks, half joking.

When Richie sighs and runs a hand through his hair, Eddie can feel

his stomach drop. “Yeah, looks like it.” Richie admits, before hesitating. “Look Eddie, about last night –“

Eddie immediately cuts him off. “It’s fine, Rich. Don’t worry about it.”

“Huh?” Richie furrows his eyebrows, confused.

Aiming for nonchalant, Eddie gives a half hearted shrug, grits his teeth. “You don’t have to worry about letting me down easy or whatever. I mean, last night should never have fucking happened in the first place.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m paying you to date me? That’s – that’s taking fucking advantage!”

A look of absolute disbelief crosses Richie’s. “Taking adv - wait, I’m sorry, do you think I sucked your dick because I wanted fucking Streetfighter?”

At Richie’s offended tone, Eddie instantly feels defensive. Voice raised slightly in frustration, he slices his hand through the air. “You literally said *I’ll do anything for Streetfighter* like, fifteen minutes ago!”

“Yeah, and that was a fucking joke!” Richie bites back. “Jesus, man.”

And sure, Eddie knows that it was a joke. But he also knows that Richie’s jokes have always tended to carry an element of truth. Maybe Richie didn’t hook up with him solely because of the deal, maybe after all their hanging out, all that awkward fake dating, he’d genuinely wanted to fool around with Eddie. Still, that doesn’t change the fact that the only reason they were hanging out in the first place was because Eddie promised to buy him a goddamn arcade game.

Eddie’s head spins.

He doesn’t know what to think or how to feel, and that makes him even more frustrated, because there’s a part of him that knows he’s going about this all wrong. But he’s had some drinks, and his chest is

pounding, and Sandra's probably right on the other side of the door. The promise of his mother's voice screaming at him for the rest of the night looms over his shoulder.

Eddie just wants it all to go away. *Now.*

"Well I don't - look, I was lonely, and stupid, and you were just -" Eddie scrambles, feeling completely out of his depth. He thinks back to last night, to how Richie's face had been just an inch from his, and says the first thing that come to mind. "You were just fucking there, okay?"

The words sound wrong as soon as they come out of Eddie's mouth, but it's too late. Richie looks like he's been slapped in the face. His eyes are flashing as he pushes off the wall.

"Fuck you Eddie." He whispers, before shoving his hands in his pockets and striding away.

And shit.

There's the sound of the door opening again, but Eddie barely notices. He immediately goes to follow Richie, voice cracking, because everything is going off the rails and it's all his fault. "Rich - "

Richie twists back to look at him. His defeated expression stops Eddie in his tracks. "Oh, and don't bother with Streetfighter, alright?" He lifts his hands in the air, mouth twisting into an awful, mocking grin. "Wouldn't want everyone that I fucked a guy to get it, right?"

And then he turns on his heel and walks away.

Eddie tries to blink back the tears that are rapidly forming in his eyes, but it's a lost cause. As he rubs his hand against his cheek, unsurprised to find it already wet, there's a cough from behind him.

"E-eds?"

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry?